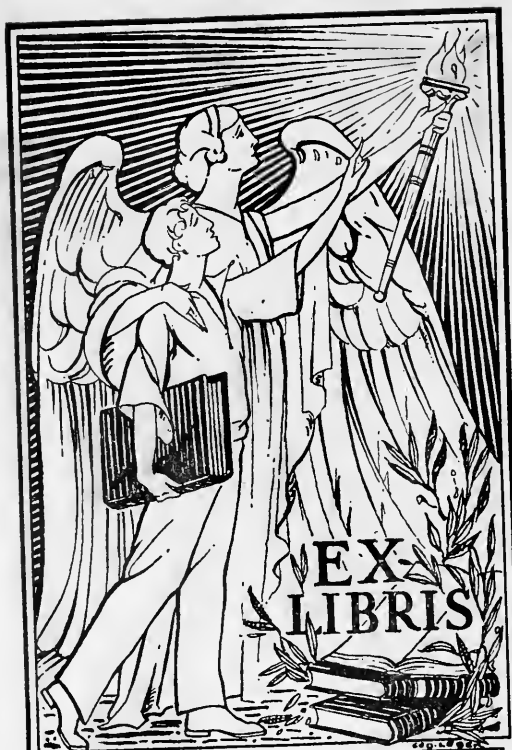


# WANTED A MOTHER

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FINALLY THE DRESS WAS FINISHED



# Wanted A Mother

BY

CLARENCE HAWKES

Author of "Tenants of the Trees, Trails to  
Woods and Waters," etc.



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# Wanted a Mother

## CHAPTER I

### AN UNWELCOME ARRIVAL

THE rickety old Concord buggy, drawn by a sedate white horse, who also had seen better days, rumbled through the covered bridge, and in due time rounded the bend in the road and came alongside Sam Perkins's mill-pond—a placid, shining expanse close to the winding country road.

The buggy had two occupants. One, a tall, awkward farm boy of perhaps sixteen; the other, a shy, shabby little girl of eight or nine years.

The boy sat well forward on the seat, his feet braced against the iron foot-rest in the bottom of the buggy. The girl, because her legs were too short to allow of that grown-up position, sat well back upon the seat, with her dingy shoes thrust straight out in front

of her, and with no bend at the knees. This position also enabled her to throw one small arm over the back of the seat, and thus to keep herself from slipping from the smooth leather cushion when they went over thank-you-marms or down steep hills.

Her rusty little hat was on awry, and her whole dress was so shabby that it would have been quite laughable had it not been so pathetic. Her dress accorded so badly with her eager little face and alert manner that the misfit was even more apparent.

She was so fresh and full of life that she should have been dressed like a little princess; instead, she was dressed like the unfortunate little pauper that she was, who had never known either father or mother.

“Tim,” she piped in her shrill treble as they emerged from the short covered bridge, “didn’t going into that wonderful, beautiful bridge make you feel like a knight driving his charger into a haunted castle where there were dragons that blew fire out of their nostrils and a beautiful princess kept a prisoner? Didn’t it make you feel all thrilly and almost screammy?”



## AN UNWELCOME ARRIVAL 9

Tim squinted at her quizzically and took off his cap, then replaced it before replying.

"Not zactly," he replied, after reflection. "You see, Silky, I ain't got no imagination like you. You know Marm Brown usen to say I hadn't as much imagination as a swill pail after feedin' time."

"Yes, Tim; but you know she usen to say I was the most unaccount thing on the poor-farm—not so much use as a lame chicken."

"It warn't true, Silky," returned the boy warmly. "You wuz a heap more account than a lame chicken, an' I don't know how I am goin' to get along without you. But I ain't much at dragons. Now I couldn't imagine this ole Snowball, that is allus lame in three legs, wuz a charger mor'n nothin'. Sam Perkins's covered bridge ain't no more a haunted castle to me than it is a pig-pen. You see, I hain't got it. My imagination hain't ever growed. I hev been so mighty busy doin' chores at the poor-farm I hain't ever done no thinkin', and I 'spect that's what makes imagination."

"No, it's readin' books that makes it,"

replied his companion wisely. "I never had but one book, an' that I had to hide always, so Marm Brown wouldn't get it and burn it up. There was lots about chargers an' knights and haunted places and prisons, and that was what made my imagination."

"Sho," replied Tim; "that must be it."

At this point in their conversation the old buggy rattled round a bend in the road, and Sam Perkins's mill-pond came in full view.

"Whew!" cried the excited treble, between long breaths that were almost like gasps. "Whew! ain't it bright and shiny? I haven't never seen any water before."

At this doubtful confession Tim laughed heartily.

"Don't you remember how you an' me used to fish in the rain-water barrel at the farm, an' don't you remember the ponds around the house in the spring?"

"Ye-e-s-s," replied the small girl doubtfully. "But I mean, of course, I haven't ever seen the ocean, or a bay—which is an arm of the sea—before."

Tim laughed again. "This hain't the

## 'AN UNWELCOME ARRIVAL 11

ocean, or a bay even," he said. "It is only Sam Perkins's old mill-pond."

"Well," replied his little companion, looking up at him wistfully, and heaving a long sigh after she had feasted her eyes upon the water, "I think it is perfectly be-ea-a-u-tiful. Fairly 'squisit. It makes me want to grow up to be a rich lady, and cross the billowing main."

"Folks like you an' me don't ever grow up rich," replied Tim. "We allus grow up poor, just like we was born."

"But things might happen," insisted the piping treble. "You know things do happen in books."

"Yes; mebbe they do in books," replied the boy, "but they don't on the poor-farm. I don't want to discourage you, Silky, but I should hate to have you disappointed."

For nearly a quarter of a mile the lazy country road skirted the sparkling mill-pond, and the sight of that was enough for the time being to awe the little girl into silence. Only when wider gaps than usual appeared among the alder bushes that fringed the road, showing corresponding

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wide expanses of the shimmering pond, there were ecstatic oh's and gasps of surprise.

Soon the old mill itself, with the roaring water plunging over the dam, and the busy saw and the mill-yard, piled high with logs, was reached, and here the inquisitive tongue was again loosed.

"What makes the water fall over that high place, Tim?" asked the excited passenger in the old buggy. "Don't it hurt itself?"

"Get up, Snowball," chirped the boy, slapping the white horse with the reins. "What makes it fall over that high place, did you say? Gosh, I don't know. It sounds easy enough to answer, but, Jimminy crickets! I can't just seem to think why 'tis."

"Tim," said the high treble reproachfully—the earnest young face was now looking up at the boy with a very serious expression—"Tim, ain't gosh and Jimminy crickets swearing? Parson White who used to preach at the farm Sunday afternoons said we shouldn't swear, or we'd be in danger of hell fire."

## AN UNWELCOME ARRIVAL 13

Tim laughed. "No, Silky," he said. "I guess them ain't swearin'—not like what the Bible means. They is just bywords."

"Tim, see that big shiny thing that screeches so and cuts right through the log."

"That's the saw," returned Tim. "They are sawing logs to build houses with."

"Don't it hurt logs to be sawed? It would us."

"No," said Tim; "I don't think it hurts 'em. I never heerd 'em holler."

After the mill was passed, the road again turned and recrossed the river below the dam, this time upon an open bridge; so there was a fine sight of the dam, with the water plunging over it, at which the little girl gazed long and hard. Then the road wound up into a deep cool wood, sweet with the fragrance of pine and hemlock.

"Is this the perfumery of the woods?" inquired the high voice, at the same time drawing in deep breaths through the small nose. "I think it is fine."

"Well, you might call it that if you wanted to," replied Tim, "but I guess it's

jest pine and balsam. You better stop talking, and try and remember what Mr. Brown told you to tell your Aunt and Uncle. It'll depend a lot on whether you remember right if you stay and have a home."

"I was to say they was my own flesh and blood, and that Aunt Lucretia was my mother's own sister, and folks was all a-sayin' it was a pity for me to be taken care of by the town of Ashton when there was them that was related to me."

This had been delivered in a high-keyed voice, and with great rapidity, with little gasps for breath between every few words.

"You mustn't say it so fast, like the multiplication table, just like you had learned it," criticised Tim.

"But I have learned it. I've been saying it over and over so I wouldn't forget, just like 'Now I lay me.' That's the way Mr. Brown said."

"But it sounds just like the multiplication table," objected Tim. "You must say it slow. Try again, Silky."

"Mr. Brown says that it is a pity ——"

"No, no," interrupted Tim. "You

## AN UNWELCOME ARRIVAL 15

mustn't say Mr. Brown says, for he wasn't to be mentioned."

"Well, he did say, he and Marm Brown, and I can't tell a lie. George Washington didn't."

"You needn't tell a lie if you don't want to," replied Tim. "You just say folks is a-sayin'."

"O Tim," cried the high treble, "do see that elfin bower."

"Where?" asked Tim, in some surprise.

"Right there, where the water runs over the stones and the bushes hang all about over it. I know it is an elfin bower."

"Them's nuthin' but jest alder bushes," replied Tim, in some disgust. "You better tend to your Uncle and Aunt, and what you're going to say. You must say marm and sir to them, and don't ask so many questions, or they won't keep you a day. I'm goin' to set you down when we get in sight of the house. I'll watch and see you find it all right. Then I'll drive back to the farm. One thing, Silky: I won't ever forget you. The farm won't ever be the same without you," and the boy choked and

looked hard into the woods, as though he too was looking for an elfin bower.

Thoughts of the coming separation caused a silence to fall between the two friends. They had been such boon companions at the poor-farm, this tall, awkward, freckle-faced boy and the eager, wistful little girl. Whenever she was not busy helping Marm Brown with the dishes, the sweeping, or the beds, she was following Tim about. "Tim's shadow" they had called her. Always full of questions and queer conceits, and as full of fancies and dreams as a May day is full of warmth and color. Only there had been no warmth and color in the life of the little girl, whose father had died three months before she was born, and whose mother had died but a few days after giving birth to her only child.

The overseers of the poor for the town of Ashton were going to try to work off their small charge upon her Aunt and Uncle, who should naturally have taken care of her but for a bitter quarrel between the two sisters over the father of the unfortunate orphan.

The younger sister had taken the man



## AN UNWELCOME ARRIVAL 17

that both loved away from Aunt Lucretia. She, in turn, had avenged herself upon the sister's child by having it sent to the Ashton poor-farm. This had nearly broken Uncle Nathan's heart; but he was a silent, submissive man, to whom his vixenish sister's word was law, so after a few futile protests on his part the cruel thing had been done.

"I shall be a-thinkin' of you lots at the farm," ventured Tim again. "It won't be the same place without you. I don't think I can feed the calves and the chickens if you ain't there to help."

The tiny hand of his companion stole into his. "I shall always remember you in my prayers," she said. "You really s'pose God hears prayers?"

"Sure He does. He would yours, anyway."

"I don't know," replied the small voice. "I ask Him for lots of things I don't never get. I don't know any of my prayers was ever answered 'cept the one about the kitten."

At the mention of the kitten, Tim blushed a bright red. His little friend had told him

that she was going to pray with all her might and main for a kitten, and the next morning they found it on the haymow. It was rather large for a newly-born kitten, and bore a striking resemblance to a litter at a neighboring farmhouse, but Silky had always considered it an answer to her prayer.

“If God only had a telephone, Tim, then we could be sure.”

“Well, p'r'aps He has,” replied Tim—“a sort of telephone.”

At this point their conversation was interrupted by the discovery that Mr. Nathan Benson's big red barn could be seen a short distance ahead through the trees, with the bright-gold cow weather-vane glistening in the sun.

“There you be,” cried Tim, pointing out the wonderful cow, which was yellow enough to give nothing but cream. “That's the place.”

“You s'pose they'll keep me. Will they be good to me?” queried Silky.

“If they don't, you come right back to the farm, an' I'll be good to you all my life,” said Tim, with warmth.

## AN UNWELCOME ARRIVAL 19

According to Mr. Brown's instructions, Tim here hitched the horse by the side of the road and helped his companion from the buggy. Her sole belongings were a dilapidated bandbox, which contained a few shabby clothes and an old cotton parasol that she considered a priceless possession.

Hand in hand they went forward, Tim carrying the bandbox and Silky gripping the parasol. At a point perhaps two hundred feet from the house Tim let her through a gate leading across lots to the house, placed the bandbox under her arm, and, with the precious parasol gripped tightly in her free hand, the frightened waif went to attack the very formidable castle in which abode the icy heart of her bitter, unforgiving Aunt, whom she had never seen.

For the last half-mile of their journey the sky had been partly overcast—a typical April day of scudding clouds and sudden showers. When about half the distance to the house had been covered by the little girl, without saying as much as by your leave, Dame Nature precipitated a perfect torrent of rain. Silky stopped, put down the

bulky bandbox, and put up the precious parasol.

Tim, who was watching from behind the stone wall near the gate, saw her dilemma, and had half a mind to go to her assistance; but Mr. Brown had said he was not to show himself on any account, so he had to let her fight her own battle.

The old bandbox was drenched before the waif got it under her arm again, and the great drops came through the flimsy sunshade almost as though it had not been spread over the shining curls.

To add to her discomfort the wind, which had come up as though by magic, tugged at the sunshade until she could scarcely hold it.

Here the cover came off the old bandbox; but it was no time for ceremony, so she let it lie upon the ground, and ran as fast as her small legs could carry her for the vine-covered porch at the front door.

Just as the steps were reached, a gust of wind, stronger than its fellows, turned the precious parasol wrong side out, and blew it from the slight hand of its owner into the corner of the porch.

## AN UNWELCOME ARRIVAL 21

All drenched and shivering, tear-stained and trembling with fright, the unfortunate little seeker after love and friendship from those whose dearest privilege should have been the bestowing of such love, stood awe-struck before the old-fashioned door, not daring to lift the large iron knocker.

It was Peter, a shaggy-coated, laughing-eyed old sheep-dog, who was lying on a mat just inside the door, who came to the rescue.

A slight noise upon the mat outside aroused him; and as he was a good watch-dog, he set up a frantic barking, which at once brought Aunt Lucretia to the door.

## CHAPTER II

### A DOUBTFUL WELCOME

LUCRETIA BENSON opened the heavy, old-fashioned door with a jerk. She did not like the idea of admitting callers at this time. Her kitchen floor was always immaculate, for whatever else might be said of Lucretia Benson, she was a good housekeeper. So thoughts of dirty boots, tracking in mud and wet, made her temper, which was always short, even more crisp than usual.

The sight that she beheld upon the threshold left her speechless and gasping. It was an extreme occasion that made Lucretia speechless, so the depth of her feelings and her great astonishment can well be imagined. There, upon the threshold, instead of one of the neighbors, as she had expected, was a limp, rain-soaked, bedrabbled, pathetic little figure, with an old, battered, rain-spattered bandbox under one arm.

The odd little hat, so apparently re-

modelled from the headgear of an older person, was on awry, and the rest of the dress was as ill-fitting and shabby as the hat. But what struck Lucretia dumb was the wistful, eager little face upturned to hers—the mouth, with its sensitive, quivering lips, which were trying so hard not to break into a sob; the pale, freckled face; but, most touching of all to Lucretia, were those two large beseeching brown eyes, the eyes of her dead sister.

For a full ten seconds Lucretia, the glib, stood speechless, while the pathetic little face gazed into hers for some sign of sympathy or some slight token of a welcome; but none seemed written upon that stern, sour countenance. Then Miss Benson found her tongue.

“For pity sakes, who be you?”

But her guilty conscience and pounding heart told her all the time that it was her sister's child.

“Please, marm, I am Eleanor, your niece,” piped the shrill treble. “Mr. Brown told me to say—I mean, he said that people were a-sayin’ that it was a pity for me to be

took care of by the Ashton poor-farm when there was those who was my own flesh and blood." Here the recital was punctuated with two big boo-hoos. "He said you ought—boo-hoo—to be willing to take me. He said I wasn't to say he said. He said I had allus been a good girl, an' you might love me if I—boo-hoo—never did anything bad. You see, I haven't ever had any one to love, 'cept Tim. Oh, Aunt Lucretia, can't you hear? Mama was your only dear sister. Didn't you love her?"

At the mention of her only sister, even the little waif, unused as she was to read faces, saw she had made a mistake, for the stern face of her Aunt hardened.

"Yes," she snapped; "a pretty sister she was. Stole the man who loved me away from me, and left me to go through the world homeless and childless; then broke his heart, and finally died, like a fool, because she couldn't think of anything else to do. A pretty sister she was! Who sent you here anyway, and what do you want of me?"

"Please, Aunt Lucretia," and now the high treble was kept steady by a great effort,



“Marm Brown an’ Mr. Brown thought how perhaps seein’ you hadn’t any little girl of your own, an’ I was your own flesh an’ blood, that perhaps you might like me. I can sweep and wash dishes, and once I made a saucer pie.”

“Oh yes, I see,” snapped Miss Benson. “So that is their little game, is it? Thought perhaps they might load you off on to us, Nathan and me. Thought as how we hadn’t got any children, and we might like you.”

The small pleader for home and love at her Aunt’s threshold did not notice the satire and scorn in her tone, so she followed up her seeming advantage quickly.

“Yes, Aunt Lucretia, that is it. Marm Brown said as how I might mellow you up as long as you hadn’t any little girl of your own.”

At these words, which were gall and wormwood to Miss Benson, the years of bitterness and disappointment leapt up in her in a great flame of wrath.

“No, I hain’t ever had any little girl of my own. I hain’t ever had any home of my own, ’cept this. Perhaps I am hard and

bitter, and no one loves me. Perhaps I am old and ugly before my time, and have a reputation for being that which I ain't by nature; and all that I have to thank your Ma for. All that's bitter and wretched she put into my life, and now you come snooking around asking me to give you a home and love and all those nice things which I've never had myself. But I ain't the milk-and-sugar kind, I ain't; so if your Mr. Brown is a-waitin' for you at the gate, he can just take you back to the poor-farm. I ain't the milk-and-sugar kind," and with these words she slammed the door in the tear-stained, upturned face.

A great lump filled the waif's throat, and scalding tears ran down her cheeks. She did not sob; instead, she stamped her foot, and beat upon the door with her small fist.

"You hateful Aunt Lucretia," she stormed. "You've said mean, mean things about my dear Mama that I hain't never seen. You hateful old thing, I hate you, I hate you!"

Here the stout little heart, that had borne so much, gave way, and the homeless, love-

less little waif burst into a fit of wild, passionate weeping; but even in this extremity she was not without a comforter.

Sympathetic, child-loving old Peter had crowded through the door during Aunt Lucretia's tirade, and now pushed his warm, shaggy, comforting coat against the little girl's breast. His face reached up to hers, and with a soft, caressing tongue he licked away her bitter tears, and put one warm dog kiss fairly upon her mouth. Instantly the little arms went round his neck, and in that moment a friendship was cemented that lasted until the old dog was laid away in the orchard, having grown too old and tired to even wag his tail for those he loved.

"You dear, good, sympathetic dog! If I had prayed, I'd believe you was sent in answer to prayer; but I didn't pray. I was too mad. Wouldn't you've been mad if some one had said mean, hateful things about your dead Mama, who was the only mother you ever had?"

For answer Peter thumped the floor very hard with his tail.

At this point Eleanor thought she heard voices inside. There was the high-keyed, angry tone of her Aunt, and the low, pleasant voice of a man, who seemed to be pleading with her.

"Anyhow, I shan't stand for any such barbarity as this," she heard the man say, with more emphasis than he had yet shown. "I wouldn't turn a dog away on such a night as this."

Then the door was opened, not with a jerk, but quietly, and a kind voice said, "Come in, Eleanor. I am your Uncle Nathan. You shall have a good supper and a warm bed to-night. I am master of this house, at least to that extent."

Somewhat reassured by the kindly voice and the large rough hand that held hers so gently, the little girl followed her newly-found Uncle into the quaint old kitchen, so full of warmth and comfort after the boisterous April shower.

A cheerful wood fire was crackling away in the large range, while a wood-box, piled high with the hardest rock maple, suggested that no matter how cold and blustering it

might be without, it would always be warm and comfortable inside.

A tall grandfather's clock was solemnly ticking off the moments in another corner of the kitchen. A table, spread with snowy linen, was set ready for supper. Suggestions of the evening meal arose in pleasant odors from the hot stove.

There were no pictures, but a large looking-glass, with a comb-case under it, suggested that the kitchen was the place for toilet-making.

Two brooms and a shiny dustpan near the wood-box intimated that the kitchen floor, which was spotless, would always be clean.

"Nathan," snapped Miss Benson, "why do you let that child stand there with the water making a puddle all over the floor? Give her a chair by the stove, and take off her shoes. I don't want my house made a horse-pond of."

Nathan quickly brought the chair, placed the small stranger in it, and began untying the shabby shoes.

"Let them shoes alone, Nate Benson.

Let her unlace her own shoes," snapped his sister. "I guess we ain't servants for the like of her."

Eleanor stooped down to untie her own shoes, as her Aunt had suggested. Great scalding tears of indignation were coursing down her cheeks, but no sound escaped her. She was too angry to make a sound. She felt outraged. Sounds were inadequate to express her grief, which lay away down in the very bottom of her small soul. Through her tears she could see the firelight in the cheerful range, the front door of which was partly open. The water upon her long dark lashes refracted the light until a dozen rainbows danced before her eyes—such beautiful pictures seen through her tears, with wonderful colors! There were rainbows in her tears, but none in her life.

Presently, as she raised her head, she felt something warm against her cheek, and once more looked into the laughing face of Peter. He was standing by her side, wagging his tail and grinning in his dog fashion as much as to say, "I know I shall like you a lot if we only have a chance to be friends."

Eleanor patted him on the head, but could not trust herself to speak. Even dog kindness was too much for her to bear with composure now.

But at this moment Aunt Lucretia came in from the pantry, where she had gone with a tin of biscuit just taken from the oven.

“Nathan Benson, look at that floor, will you—and I just mopped it this morning. All child and dog tracks. It looks like a pig-pen! I won’t have it. I will at least keep that dog in the shed, where he belongs.”

Seizing the broom, she dealt the unsuspecting Peter a sharp thump upon the back. With a yelp of pain he escaped to the wood-shed, where the door was slammed after him, narrowly missing his tail.

At the unjust treatment of her newly-found friend, a flame of indignation leapt up in the small breast.

“Oh, you cruel woman. I hate you!” she sobbed. “You, breaking the back of that angel dog who was comforting me when my heart was broke.”

The small fury slipped down from the

chair, and stamped with her shoeless foot upon the floor.

“ I hain’t never had any Father or Mother, or Uncle or Aunts, an’ I have allus been so lonesome and hungry in here,” and she laid her hand upon her heaving breast. “ I was so glad when Mr. Brown told me I had got a really true Uncle and Aunt, who would be good to me if they saw me. But it was a lie. You don’t love me. I know you don’t. So now I hain’t got any one in the world.”

Here a friendly bark from the wood-shed interrupted her. It was Peter. He was very much alive after all.

“ P’r’aps his back ain’t broke,” sniffed his new friend.

“ Broke, no!” snapped Aunt Lucretia. “ I sometimes wish it was. He’s always tracking into the kitchen. I am glad that we have seen what a temper you have. You will go back to the poor-farm in the morning. There’ll be no nonsense about that.”

Here Uncle Nathan skillfully interrupted further conversation by unbuttoning the



shabby dress with kind yet clumsy fingers, and the half-drenched child was wrapped in an old shawl while her clothes were placed by the stove to dry.

Half an hour of toasting by the warm kitchen fire served to dry Eleanor, and by that time supper was ready.

Uncle Nathan placed a cushion in an ordinary chair, and thus made it high enough so that the head of golden curls came well above the table-cloth.

Eleanor closed her eyes very devoutly while Uncle Nathan said grace, and whispered a very short prayer all her own.

It would have astonished her Uncle and Aunt greatly to have heard it, for she prayed under her breath,—

“O God, be merciful to me in the land of the heathen. Please invert Aunt Loretia. Amen.”

Her Aunt placed a generous helping of mashed potato upon her plate, and a fried egg and two slices of bacon. She was very hungry, for grief in the young rarely dulls the appetite, and the long ride with Tim had made her so.

No one noticed that before beginning upon her potato she drew a line through it from front to back with her knife across the plate, dividing it into two equal parts. She also cut the egg in the same way, likewise the bacon. Then she took her fork, ate the potato upon the left side of her plate, and half of the egg and bacon. When this was done she was still very hungry, but did not touch the food upon the right side of her plate.

"Why don't you eat the rest of your potato and meat?" asked her Aunt sharply. She had stern notions about bringing up children, not having brought up any herself.

"Please, I don't want any more," replied the child respectfully.

"Ain't you hungry," inquired her Aunt, "or ain't our food good enough for you? I don't s'pose it's up to the poor-farm cookin'."

"It isn't that," whimpered Eleanor.

"Well, what is it, then?" snapped her Aunt.

"Why, I don't want to tell. If you've

got to know, I have eaten Uncle Nathan's half of my supper, but I can't eat the other half. It chokes me."

Lucretia glared at her, but said nothing.

"Eat the rest of your supper, Eleanor," said her Uncle.

After some gulping and choking she obeyed.

By her plate there was a brimming sauce dish of golden maple syrup, and this she sought to divide with her spoon, just as she had the potato, but no matter how much she tried, as soon as she ate Uncle Nathan's half her Aunt's half flowed into that portion of the saucer.

Aunt Lucretia watched her narrowly, with a dark scowl upon her face. Finally, seeing that she could not divide the syrup, and, moreover, being tempted by its delicious flavor—for it was the first she had ever eaten—she swallowed her scruples and likewise the syrup.

"I see you can eat my half of the syrup," sneered her Aunt.

"I couldn't divide it," piped the high treble.

Uncle Nathan wanted to laugh, but he wisely forbore.

After supper the dishes were washed. Eleanor shyly offered to help wipe them.

"Marm Brown says I'm awful good at dishes," she volunteered.

"I don't want mine all broke, so I guess I'll do 'em myself."

After this rebuff the little girl went into her shell, so to speak, and said nothing until bedtime. But she kept up a terrible thinking as she sat by the fireside, watching the flames in the stove and the shadows on the wall.

This had been her Mother's home (so Marm Brown had told her). Perhaps her Mother had sat by the fireside and watched the shadows in the same way.

When her Aunt told her it was time to go to bed, she begged so hard to say good-night to Peter that she was finally allowed the privilege. She found him asleep behind the wood-shed door, but he was glad enough to awaken and see his new friend.

Eleanor put her arms about his shaggy neck and whispered in his ear, "Peter, I

think you are just splendid, an' I am goin' to pray for you. You are an angel dog, so there;- good-night." With this she kissed him on the head and left him.

Silently Aunt Lucretia led the way upstairs to a large bedroom with a tall-posted bed, all white and wonderful.

"I presume you will dirty it all up," she said, "but it will only be for one night, and I can wash the things to-morrow."

Silently the waif undressed and scrambled into bed, without even remembering to say her prayers, and as silently her Aunt left her.

"Didn't even say good-night," sobbed the small voice in the white pillow a few minutes later. "I know she ain't my Mama's own sister. She couldn't be so mean. I know there is some mistake. I know there is. God bless Peter, and make him a good dog. (But he is a good dog already, God.) God, don't let anything git him there in the woodshed all alone; and God be awful good to Uncle Nathan, for I know he almost loves me. I feel it when he touches me. His hands is full of love. God keep Uncle

Nathan, and send me back to the poorhouse quick. Amen."

Half an hour later Aunt Lucretia stole into the room. She came close to the bed, and stood looking at the sleeping child, shielding her face from the light of the candle with her hand.

Presently she noticed a small ribbon about the girl's neck. Carefully she reached out and drew it from under the bedclothes.

There was a locket upon it, and she held it for a moment in the light of the candle. As the light fully revealed a medallion on one side of the locket, a groan escaped from her tightly-set lips, but she put it carefully back under the bedclothes and left the room.

It was the face of her dead sister that had looked up at her from the old locket.

## CHAPTER III

### A DAY OF MISHAPS

THE following morning Aunt Lucretia was frying griddle-cakes and Uncle Nathan was reading the weekly paper, waiting for breakfast, when there came a rattle upon the knob of the door leading upstairs, as though small hands sought to turn it.

After two or three futile attempts the knob turned sharply and the door swung wide open, showing a dishevelled little figure in a shabby nightdress.

At first the big brown eyes blinked uncertainly, as though they had not been long open; but when the waif made out her Aunt, tall and stern, frying cakes above the kitchen stove, her indignation broke forth.

“Aunt Lucretia, aren’t you ’shamed you are so mean to my poor Mama? I want to be a good girl. Marm Brown said I must, or you wouldn’t keep me, but you fill me full of mads.”

Aunt Lucretia glared sternly down at the indignant small figure blazing up at her. "You are a pretty girl to want decent folks to keep you," she retorted. "Insult them before you get inside the door, and fly in a fury every five minutes. You are the worst-tempered child I ever saw."

"You make me," whimpered the orphan. "You make mads get into me so I can't breathe. I 'spicioned it the minute I woke up and saw it."

"'Spicioned what?" snapped Aunt Lucretia.

"Why, when I woke up and saw the picture with the face towards the wall, I 'spicioned it was my Mama, you said such cruel things about her. So I got up in a chair and turned the picture around, and there was my be-e-a-au-ut-tiful Mama. I cried awful when I saw her face all cobwebs. I thought she might be 'fraid in the dark all the time. It was mean, Aunt Lucretia. My Mama never did anything bad, an' I know you did it. Uncle Nathan would not be so mean."

Here the indignant orphan burst into such



a violent fit of weeping that she could no longer storm at her grim Aunt, or even point a chubby, accusing finger at her. In her distress she fled to Uncle Nathan, and pillowed her face upon his knee, while she sobbed as though her small heart would break.

At the mention of the picture in the spare room with its face towards the wall, even Aunt Lucretia turned a bit paler, while a deep flush overspread Uncle Nathan's face.

The picture had been reversed the day that Lucretia's younger sister was married, and had never seen the light since.

Uncle Nathan passed his toil-worn, clumsy hands lightly over the curly head. "Never mind, Eleanor," he said gently. "You don't understand these things. I'm sure that it will be all right some day."

"That is right, you coddle the child and make a fool of her, just as you did her Mother. You never did care that my heart was broken and my whole life ruined." Lucretia turned a griddle-cake with a vicious slap.

"When I woke up," sniffed Eleanor, "I said, 'God make me good all day long!' but when I saw my Mama's beautiful face all cobwebs and in the dark, it made me so full of mads I couldn't get my dress on."

"There, there," said Uncle Nathan soothingly. "You just run upstairs like a good girl and dress. By that time breakfast will be ready. We're going to have slap-jacks and maple syrup. Guess you like them, don't you?"

At the thought of crisp, brown, buckwheat cakes and maple syrup Eleanor smiled through her tears.

"I think they're just 'licious," she said. "I'm sorry that such mads got into me, Aunt Lucretia."

"So am I," replied her Aunt tartly. "After breakfast your Uncle will take you back to the poor-farm. We don't want any such children here."

A row of pearly teeth bit hard upon two pouting lips, and kept back the words, "I want to go; I hate you. You are not my good Aunt that Marm Brown said." So, without returning the hot answer that she

longed to give, Eleanor turned and went upstairs.

All the time she was dressing she could hear the sound of animated conversation in the kitchen below—the deep, mellow voice of her Uncle, and then the strident voice of her Aunt.

She did not know her Uncle was pleading for her with tears in his eyes—pleading against the inhumanity of sending one so young and helpless, one who was their flesh and blood, back to the poor-farm. She did not know that the thought of keeping her was opening up a new heaven to Uncle Nathan's eyes.

Breakfast was a sad and silent meal, although there were plenty of good things to eat. Fried cakes with golden syrup lose in flavor when salted with bitter tears, so Eleanor thought; and as for Uncle Nathan, he was so troubled with the whole affair that he put salt, instead of sugar, into his coffee.

When breakfast was over Lucretia rose from the table and put her chair back with a jerk. "Now, Nate Benson," she snapped,

as though to forestall any argument, "you catch and hitch up the colt, and take this child back to the Ashton poor-farm, and tell Mr. Brown and Marm Brown that we ain't an annex to the poor-farm, and don't propose to be put upon in this way."

When Lucretia Benson spoke in this decided manner, and the dark mantle of blood overspread her face as it did now, her brother knew it was useless to argue. So he sorrowfully put on his hat and went to the barn. Here he got a halter, a pail containing corn, and started for the pasture to catch the colt.

There was no zest in his going, however. In fact, all his movements were deliberate. He went much as a boy might seek the parental presence when he knows Dad is waiting for him with a neat clump of birch rods.

He stopped along the lane to examine certain weeds, in which he ordinarily took no interest. One might almost have thought him a botanist, so critically he examined leaf and stem. Finally, when he saw his

sister come out on the back porch and look at him, he was obliged to go along.

As ill luck would have it, the colt was waiting for him at the barway at the end of the lane.

Now Uncle Nathan was an expert horseman, and what he didn't know about horses wasn't worth knowing (so his neighbors said), but he did not show much skill in approaching the colt. He did not slide up to him carefully with the halter behind him, but went boldly forward, holding it in plain sight.

"Oh ho!" whinnied the colt; "I guess not. That corn which you have in the pail might be good, but I don't think I want to travel ten miles to pay for it. The feed in the pasture is sweet, and my freedom is too satisfying this morning. I am developing a fine gait," and he started off at a breakneck pace to the farther end of the field.

Uncle Nathan followed slowly, examining flowers and plants as he went. For quite a spell he did not seem to be able to see the colt, although he stood in plain sight under an apple tree.

Finally the colt galloped out in front of him, and he again advanced, carrying the halter as before.

“What a stupid old man you are this morning!” nickered the colt. “Why, any one would think you had not even got horse sense.”

For an hour Uncle Nathan followed the colt about the pasture, exhibiting the halter to him; then he was suddenly aroused from his sad thoughts by a high-pitched call.

It was “Na-than!” started away down on low C; but the call gradually gathered volume, and finally ended upon the octave above, with almost the power of a calliope. It was said Lucretia Benson could summon her brother with this call from any part of the farm.

Nathan answered with a halloo, and made his way quickly to the house.

“Nate Benson, what are you a-doin’? Why hain’t you got the colt hitched up? You ought to be at Ashton by this time.”

“The colt is dretful frisky this mornin’, Lucretia,” replied her brother. “I’ve chased

him all over the pasture, but he won't let me come within two rods of him."

"I don't believe a word of it," snorted his sister; "but if you air a-dawdling around because you don't want to take that young one back to the poor-farm, that excuse about the colt won't serve you. You jist harness up the old mare, and go along with her."

"The mare has throwed off two of her shoes. Ef I wuz to drive her to Ashton, she'd be so lame I couldn't get her home," replied Nate.

"Well, then, you take her to the shop and get her shod, and go in the afternoon."

"I might do that," replied Nathan, and a faint spark of hope blazed up in his heart. He had gained a little precious time. There was no telling what might happen within the next three hours.

Nathan went to the horse barn and harnessed the old mare. Never had he harnessed with such care before. When he had killed all the time he could, he drove around to the front door.

"Lucretia," he said doubtfully, sticking

his head in at the doorway, "I thought perhaps I might take Eleanor with me to the shop, so she wouldn't be a-bothering you, seein' as you don't like children very well anyway."

"I don't want her to be seen with you. It will make a great scandal," replied his sister. "I don't want folks to be a-telling round as how the poor-farm sent her here and we sent her back; I don't want them to know anything about it. No, she better stay here."

"I guess folks won't need to be told. You can trust Marm Brown to do that. I presume Bill Brown has told it all over Ashton by this time," said Nathan.

"Well, it's going to be a pretty mess. I wish she had never been born."

"Don't talk that way before the child, Lucretia," said her brother. "It ain't her fault."

Eleanor was standing behind her Aunt, trying not to burst out in a storm of indignation. If she could only get back to the poor-farm once more, she would never wish for relatives again. But now her only thought



was to get away from her Aunt and go with Uncle Nathan to the blacksmith shop.

"Please let me go, Aunt Lucretia," she put in. "I can stay in the carriage all the time, and no one will see me. I never saw a blacksmith shop in my whole life."

"Oh, go along and keep out of my sight," snapped Lucretia. "I will be well rid of the two of you."

The child danced into the kitchen, got her dilapidated hat, and hurried out to Uncle Nathan—her face, which had been a picture of despair a moment before, now bright with smiles.

Her Uncle helped her into the carriage, got in beside her, and chirped to the old mare, who jogged slowly down the road.

"Oh, Uncle Nathan," cried the shrill treble excitedly, as soon as they were out of earshot of the house, "I am so glad to have you all to myself for a little while. I think it is just splendid."

She gripped his knee with both hands, and looked up into his face with a radiant smile.

Uncle Nathan blushed like a boy. "It is

sorter nice," he said. "I 'low I was rather plannin' on it myself. How did you an' your Aunt get on while I was down in the pasture? I sorter worried for you. You see, you might not just understand your Aunt."

"I got into trouble right off as soon as you was gone. I was trying to be a good girl like Marm Brown said to. It don't seem to be any use with Aunt Lucretia. I offered to wipe the dishes, an' she finally said I might. Then I was so scart for fear I would not do 'em right that I dropped Great-Grandma Benson's pitcher and broke it all to pieces. Aunt Lucretia was so mad she give me an awful slap on the face, and told me to go into the wood-shed and stay till you come back. I think my heart would have broke if Peter had not been there. He comforted me lots, and said he was sorry with his tail. Marm Brown usen to slap me sometimes, but it didn't hurt so much as it does to have Aunt Lucretia, because she is my Aunt, an' it hurts to have folks that's your own flesh and blood slap you."

"Well, well," said Uncle Nathan. "You

and I are going to have a fine ride. Perhaps your Aunt will be feelin' better when we get home."

"Oh, Uncle Nathan, now we are all alone, let's play 's'posin'.' "

"Play what ?" inquired her Uncle doubtfully.

"Why, s'posin', Uncle Nathan. Didn't you ever play that when you was a boy ? I s'pose you was a boy once."

"I suppose I was, but it seems a long time ago. But how do you play this s'posin' as you call it ?"

"Why, it's this way," replied his niece. "I say s'posin' you was a prince, then you say s'posin' I was a princess, and then we both tell what we would do."

Uncle Nathan smiled good-naturedly. "I guess you mean supposing, don't you ?"

"Yes, yes, that's it," replied Eleanor. "Now, I will tell first. I am s'posin' that you was my really honest and true black and blue Uncle Nathan, that belonged to me."

"All right," said Uncle Nathan. "Now I am supposing that you were my really

honest and true niece that belonged to me."

"Oh, Uncle Nathan, you play it splendid," exclaimed his niece excitedly; "that was just what I wanted you to s'pose. Now I am s'posin' that you have got both of your eyes shut perfectly tight so you can't see—not even peek."

"Well, I am supposing the same thing," replied her Uncle, and he shut his eyes as tight as he could and still "peek" out of one corner.

Carefully the little girl got to her knees upon the seat beside him, and before he even dreamed what was coming, she had flung two chubby arms about his neck, and printed a warm childish kiss upon his rough cheek.

"Now the game is over," she cried gleefully.

"That wasn't fair; you took me un-awares," said Uncle Nathan.

"Oh yes, it was. That is just the way to play s'posin'. Now let's play 'mine.'"

"All right," returned her Uncle. "You just start it."

"Well, you play it this way," explained his niece. "I pick out something beautiful and say it is mine. Then you say something is yours, and we keep going till we've got everything we can see that we want, and it's lots of fun. I'll begin. Oh, see that perfectly be-ea-au-tiful brook. That is mine."

"Well," said Uncle Nathan, "I guess I'll take the cow over in the pasture. She's kinda beautiful."

"Cows ain't beautiful," said his niece. "I guess you don't play this good as you do s'posin'. I will take that great big tree with the scraggly arms."

"Well, I guess I'll take that calf over in the lot with the cow. As long as I've got the cow, the calf will be lonesome if I don't take it too."

"I will take that dear little bird on the limb. Oh, see him, Uncle Nathan! Uncle Nathan, why don't you take something in this beautiful woods and let the cows and calves go?"

"Why, you see, the woods is mine already, and the cows belong to Squire Hopkins."

I had druther take something that don't belong to me."

"Why, Uncle Nathan, do you really mean this perfectly beautiful woods is yours—all your very own?"

"Sure thing," replied her Uncle.

"And are all the great big tall trees yours, and the short bushes too?"

"I guess they be," said her companion.

"And are all the ferns and beautiful mosses yours?"

"Sure thing," replied Nathan.

"Was that little bird that we saw yours, and do you own all the birds and squirrels and foxes and mice and ants and bugs?"

"Guess I do," replied her Uncle.

"If the mother rabbits should have little baby rabbits, would those be yours too? And are all the happy toads yours, and the trouts in the brooks?"

"All mine," replied Uncle Nathan, an amused smile playing around his mouth.

"Is the dirt yours, as far down as you want to dig?"

"Half-way down to China, if I want to go so far," returned Uncle Nathan.

His niece gasped, and slid farther back on the seat that she might better stare up at him. Uncle Nathan watched her out of the corner of his eye with much amusement.

"Well," said Eleanor after a minute spent in deep thought, "I guess you are the richest man in the world."

Uncle Nathan laughed. "Sometimes I think I am poor," he said. "I have got plenty of land, but no one to love me."

"Oh yes, you have," cried the little girl excitedly. "I love you as high up as the top of that tall tree, and as deep down as the bottom of a well."

For answer her Uncle squeezed the small hand that slid into his, and a silence of deep understanding reigned for as much as a minute.

"Uncle Nathan, may I make-believe drive with the end of the lines?" piped the shrill voice at the end of that time.

"Sure," replied Uncle Nathan, passing over the end of the lines.

The very serious business of driving caused a cessation of questions, for Eleanor sat up very straight, and gripped the lines

tightly in her chubby hands, and at the same time looked hard at the old mare's ears, as though the success of driving depended on tending strictly to business. When they went down a steep hill, she gripped the lines even more firmly, and drew the corners of her mouth down, and scowled with the effort.

"Sure, Mr. Benson, and how are you?" cried the Irish blacksmith as they drove up to the shop.

"Fine, Pat," returned Uncle Nathan. "Pretty busy to-day?"

"Two ahead of you," returned Pat; "but I'll be ready for you in about an hour."

"I ain't in a bit of a hurry," returned Mr. Benson. "I'll just sit here in the carriage. When you are ready you let me know."

Eleanor watched the operations of the smith, through a crack between the curtains of the carriage, with deep concern.

Finally their turn came, and after another long wait the horse was shod, and they turned their way homeward, the better part of the afternoon having been lost waiting for their turn.



Lucretia was standing on the porch when they drove up.

“Nate Benson,” she stormed, “what have you been doing all this afternoon?”

“There was a great rush at the shop,” returned her brother. “We had to wait most two hours ’fore it was our turn.”

“Well,” snapped his sister, “you just turn the old mare around and start for Ashton. I don’t care if you don’t get round till after dark, and have to do chores by lantern light. It’ll serve you right.”

Reluctantly Uncle Nathan turned the horse about, then suddenly cried “Whoa,” as though he had forgotten something.

“I can’t drive this carriage another mile till it is iled,” he said. “I’ve been ’specting a hot box all the way back from the shop.”

He tied the old mare to the hitching-post, and went into the wagon-shed for the wrench.

“Lucretia,” he called after a few minutes, “have you seen the wrench?”

“Where do you think I’d see it—in the pantry?” snorted his sister. “I don’t use

the wrench ; if I did I'd know where it was," and she went to help him look for it.

They searched the wagon-shed from end to end, but it was apparently not there. Then the barn and the wood-shed were ransacked, but with no better result. Each moment Lucretia's wrath grew.

" You can go in the lumber wagon," she flared. " It would serve you right for dawdling around all day long."

" It's too heavy for the old mare to draw all that distance," returned her brother.

" You are the most exasperating man in the world. Well, I suppose we'll have to give it up for to-night, but you can start first thing in the morning."

Peter had been sitting on his tail at the wagon-shed door watching the search for the wrench. There was a curious look upon his wrinkled dog face. He had seen Nathan hide the wrench under a beam in the wagon-shed that very forenoon, but being a wise old dog, and moreover in the conspiracy, he said nothing.

The evening meal was a silent one. Lucretia was too angry with her brother and

the child to talk, and neither Uncle Nathan nor Eleanor dared say very much. Both ate in silence, but they exchanged understanding glances when Lucretia was not looking.

“Now you just hustle up to bed,” commanded Aunt Lucretia when supper was over.

Eleanor was about to object that it was not quite dark, but getting a warning look from her Uncle she obeyed silently.

That evening, after Nathan had wound the clock and Lucretia was pulling down the shades for the night, the brother cleared his throat with a violent cough.

“Lucretia,” he said at last, “I believe the Lord sent that child to you and I.”

“I more think it was the devil,” flared Lucretia. “What put such a fool notion as that into your head, Nate Benson?”

“Why—why—because—because I asked Him to. This old place is so lonesome, and you and I are so much to ourselves. I wanted something to chirk it up. I asked Him the night before last, and yesterday she came.”

Lucretia opened her mouth to speak, but could only gasp. Twice she tried, then found her tongue.

“Nate Benson, you mean to tell me that you have been a-asking the Lord any such fool thing as that without first asking me if you might?”

“Yes, Lucretia, I do,” returned her brother, with more decision than he usually used in speaking to her.

Then she whirled and flounced into the bedroom, slamming the door behind her with such violence that the dishes rattled on the table.

Nathan Benson looked thoughtfully for several seconds at the door through which his sister had disappeared, then took his candle and went quietly up to bed.

## CHAPTER IV

### A PROBATIONER

THE following morning Eleanor was awakened by sounds of animated conversation in the kitchen below, and her sensitive child heart at once told her that she was the subject of conversation. She dressed hurriedly and went to the open window. Here she could hear the voices plainly, but not much of what was said. Finally, after a longer speech than usual from her Uncle, the child plainly distinguished these words from her Aunt,—

“Well, there is one thing that you can depend on : if she stays, I go.”

Child that she was, the waif fully comprehended the significance of these words. Spite of all Uncle Nathan could do or say, she would have to go back to the poor-farm.

It was so hard to have almost gained an Uncle, such a dear kind one as Uncle Na-

than, and then to have him snatched from you in this way—especially when you had never had any one who really belonged to you before.

It was not until she heard her Aunt say these decisive words that the little girl realized that she had wanted to stay all the time, although she had stoutly affirmed that she was willing and anxious to return to the poorhouse. This was her mother's home, and it was a dear old place. The graceful elms in the front yard, where her mother had probably had a swing, the chicken-coops in the back yard, the calves and sheep in the barn, the colt in the pasture, and the sedate old mare, the turkeys, the geese, and, best of all, dear old Peter—Peter, with his laughing dog face, and his glad tail so willing to wag for those he loved. What a comfort his warm dog kisses had been! He was more than a dog; he was a friend.

Now this beautiful farmhouse, with all its wonderful life, would be lost to her forever. It was so terribly hard. Why were some folks born on the poor-farm and others in wonderful castles? Even Cinderella had

been fortunate enough to attract the attention of a prince. But they did not have princes any more. It was a sad old world, full of heartache and disappointments. With these sorrowful thoughts the waif, after brushing away her tears, went down to breakfast.

Silently the three took their places at the table, and the loveless meal was eaten almost without a word. Eleanor cast furtive glances at her Uncle; but his face was troubled, and in it was no sign of comfort, or hope for better things ahead, as he had promised the day before.

When breakfast was over, Miss Benson said shortly, "Now, Nathan, harness the old mare, and we will have this sorry business over as soon as possible."

Uncle Nathan got his hat and went to the barn without a word of protest. It was useless to say anything when his sister was so bitter. It was true she had kept house for him for twenty-five years, and he could not drive her from their home now. But why was she so bitter?

"God soften her heart; God soften her

heart," he prayed, as he slowly harnessed the old mare.

How deeply he had learned to love this little girl in the day and a half that she had been with them, he alone knew.

But no matter how much you "potter," you cannot spend more than half an hour harnessing a horse to an old carriage, and soon Uncle Nathan drove around to the porch, where the sorry little figure of his niece was waiting.

"Hadn't you better go in and say good-bye to your aunt?" suggested Uncle Nathan. (Uncle Nathan was still "clinging to straws.")

"She ain't my Aunt," returned Eleanor stoutly; "she is a foreigner. She don't love me; she hates me. I know she is a foreigner."

"Well, I guess you had better go inside and say good-bye. It is more polite."

"I don't want to," objected the waif; then a bright thought came to her, and she looked up smiling.

"Parson White, who usen to preach at the poor-farm, said we should do good to those



that spitefully used us, and I guess that means Aunt Lucretia."

The man in the carriage outside strained his ears in order that he might hear what was going on inside.

"Aunt Lucretia," he heard the piping treble say, "I have come to say good-bye."

"Well, go along; I don't want to say good-bye to you or anything else. A pretty mess you've made, stirring your Uncle all up in this way. Why, he ain't himself at all this morning. He looks as though he was a-going to a funeral. Just go along, and don't have any more words about it. I don't bear you any ill-will, but I can't stand the sight of you."

"Please, Aunt Lucretia, won't you kiss me good-bye? I didn't ever have an Aunt kiss me. I'll go along and won't bother you any if you will kiss me good-bye."

"Don't be silly, child. I ain't the kissing kind. Just go along."

Here Nathan heard the pantry door slam violently, and he knew the interview was over. A moment later the small pleader

came sobbing out to the carriage. "She won't even kiss me good-bye," she wailed.

"Well, well, I guess you'll get over it," replied Uncle Nathan reassuringly. "You know we're going to have the finest kind of a ride, you and me."

"But, Uncle Nathan," sobbed the plaintive voice, "it's the last ride we shall ever have in the world together. I haven't but just found you, Uncle Nathan, and now I have lost you the second day. It will break my heart; I know it will."

"Oh no, it won't," replied her Uncle reassuringly. "I know it will all turn out right some day."

"Do you think there will be a prince and a charger and lots of fine things?" asked the grief-stricken one, looking up at him intently through her tears.

"Sure, sure; I know there will. Now come and get into the carriage, and we will soon be in the fine woods that you like so well."

All this time Lucretia had been watching them through a crack between the shutters of the kitchen window.

“Nate Benson, you old fool,” she snorted under her breath. “I do believe the old softy is a-cryin’ himself. If this ain’t a pretty mess of fish! Every one is bound to lay it all to me, as usual. I wish the child had never been born.”

Eleanor climbed into the carriage, and Uncle Nathan gave her the end of the reins that she might make-believe drive.

“Get up,” he chirped to the old mare, and they were off for their last ride together.

“Nate Benson!” called a shrill voice as the carriage rounded a great willow and was about to turn into the road; “Nate Benson!”

Uncle Nathan pulled so sharply on the reins as to bring the mare almost to her haunches. “Yes, Lucretia!” he called back.

“The mare seems to be lame in her off fore foot. You better put her up and see if you can catch the colt.”

At these words from his sister, Nathan Benson, unaccustomed as he was to show his feelings, actually turned pale. Twice he opened his mouth to reply, but speech forsook him. Had the Angel Gabriel blown

the last trump, the sound of that mighty horn and what it meant would not have more completely upset him.

“Don’t you hear me, Nate Benson!” fairly shrieked his sister. “I say, put up the old mare, and maybe you can catch the colt this afternoon.”

“All right, Lucretia!” called back her brother, at last finding his tongue. “Now you speak of it, seems to me the mare does sorter favor her off foot.”

Even the mare herself seemed to imbibe the new spirit that entered into her driver. She backed and turned about with the greatest alacrity, and soon the carriage was back in the shed and Nathan was unharnessing.

It was hardly the same man who now unbuckled the straps. He had fussed and fidgeted with them half an hour before; his fingers now flew nimbly over the buckles, while he hummed scraps of “Sweet By-and-By” and “Hold the Fort.”

“What makes you look so smilin’, Uncle Nathan?” asked his niece, who was standing near by watching the process of unharnessing.

“ Oh, I don’t know, Eleanor. Seems to me it’s a mighty fine day, and fine weather always gets into my blood,” replied her Uncle. “ We are sorter like the plants, if we only knew it. We ripen in the sunlight and grow mellow.”

“ Like pumpkins and cabbages, you mean, Uncle Nathan? ” asked the inquisitive one.

“ Well, I can’t just say I was a-thinking of pumpkins and cabbages,” replied Uncle Nathan; “ but a pumpkin is a sorter glorious-looking thing when you see it all ripe and covered over with the golden sunlight, a-gleamin’ in the cornfield.”

“ I’d rather grow like pansies,” replied Eleanor. “ You know pansies are just like little faces of flower-children just hitched on to stems. They can even nod their heads when you speak to them. Didn’t you ever see them, Uncle Nathan? ”

“ No, I can’t really say I did. I guess you have got quite an imagination, Eleanor.”

“ I s’pose I have,” replied his niece, with a deep sigh. “ Marm Brown usen to say that was all there was to me.”

“ Marm Brown was a fool,” replied Uncle

Nathan quickly. "I mean she was foolish. We shouldn't ever call people fools, Eleanor. There now, we've got the mare unharnessed. I'll go in and change my clothes. Guess I better spade up your Aunt's flower-beds, and fix her a new clothes-pole, and mend the wood-shed floor, an' do a few other things that she has been a-wanting for some time."

Nathan went into the house to get on his overalls, but Eleanor preferred to stay behind on the porch.

"Nate," she heard Aunt Lucretia say as he came out, "you needn't be a-going to getting foolish ideas in your head. It's just because the mare is lame. I may conclude to have you catch the colt this afternoon. Tomorrow morning, anyway. I ain't a-going to have my life broken into in this way, when we have been so peaceable for twenty-five years. A child fusses a house all up anyway."

"Aunt Lucretia," called Eleanor through the open door, "may I stay outside and see Uncle Nathan spade up the flower-beds?"

"I'll be glad enough to have you. I don't want you bothering about in the house, full

of your eternal questions. You just keep out of my sight, and we'll both be suited."

In accompaniment to "They are Gathering Homeward One by One," Mr. Benson began turning the rich black dirt for the flower-beds.

"Oh, Uncle Nathan," cried the shrill treble after a moment of perfect silence, "you've cut an angle-worm right in two in the middle, so there is two of him. Oh, Uncle Nathan, see him wiggling and squirmbling. Do you s'pose it hurts him, Uncle Nathan?"

"I didn't mean to cut him," said Uncle Nathan, "but he got in the way. You see, I can't see them all down in the dirt."

"Do you s'pose it is a boy worm or a girl worm, Uncle Nathan?" asked the question-mark.

"Give it up," replied the man with the shovel. "Don't you ever ask your Aunt any sech question as that; she would hev a fit."

"You mean she would fall down on the floor and groan, and have foam on her mouth like Billy Jones?" asked his niece in astonishment.

“Why no, not jist like that. I mean she wouldn’t understand, and would think you was silly. You just keep them thoughts for me.”

“Uncle Nathan, why do you dig up all the beautiful green grass and make it all dirty?”

“So the flowers can grow, child,” replied her Uncle.

“Uncle Nathan, why does flowers have to keep their feet in the dirt when they grow, and why do folks wash the dirt off their feet?”

Uncle Nathan stopped with his foot upon the shovel, and looked quizzically down at the eager face turned up to his. He scratched his head, and looked down into the flower-bed as though seeking an answer, and then up into the blue sky.

“Guess that is a sorter conundrum without an answer,” he replied at last.

“You really mean you don’t know, Uncle Nathan?” asked the inquisitor.

“S’pose I could make up an answer if I tried hard,” said her Uncle, “but I don’t just think of one this minute. You see, the beds



we grow in have nice white sheets, and if we didn't wash our feet we would get them dirty, while the beds the flowers grow in are nothing but dirt, so it don't matter."

Here the attention of the inquisitive one was attracted by an old hen and a flock of small chicks that came clucking and cheeping toward the flower-bed to see what was doing.

"Uncle Nathan," piped the high treble, "do you s'pose the old mother hen has named all her children?"

"Can't really say as to that," replied Mr. Benson. "But I guess she'd know if any of 'em was missing."

"Uncle Nathan, may I call that little teenty-tonty one mine as long as I stay—call it my very own baby chicken?"

"Why yes, I guess so," replied Uncle Nathan.

"I mean the one with the perfectly beautiful little face, that looks as though it was smiling. I shall call her Sarah."

"P'r'aps it's a rooster," put in Uncle Nathan.

"Then I shall call him Abraham. I will

call her Sarah until I find out she is a rooster, then I will call him Abraham."

"It's a good idea," said Uncle Nathan, smiling broadly.

For a while Eleanor was busy trying to count the chicks; but they scampered about, so it was a hard task.

"Uncle Nathan," inquired the small voice excitedly, "why is it that chickens have feathers, and cats have fur, and dogs have hair, and folks have skin?"

Uncle Nathan dropped his shovel, and had to pick it up again, so engrossed was he in thinking out the answer to this simple question. Sure enough why was it? Simple as mental arithmetic, yet as mysterious as the secret of life, and the wonder of the changing seasons.

"Why, Eleanor," he replied, after some hesitation, "I guess you'll have to wait till you study natural history. I'm afraid I can't tell you."

"Nate Benson," called his sister, "you just stop gabbling with that child and tend to my flower-beds."

"I guess you'd better go play with Peter



"MAY I HAVE THAT LITTLE ONE FOR MY VERY OWN?"



for a spell while I finish the beds," said Uncle Nathan.

Eleanor found Peter lying upon his mat in the wood-shed. He was the faithful watchman by night, and so had to make up his sleep in the daytime.

"Now, Peter," said Eleanor, putting her arms about the old dog's neck, and getting a good dog kiss in return for the squeeze that she gave him, "I'm going to play with you. What shall we play?"

Peter wagged his tail very violently, and gave two or three short sharp barks, as much as to say, "I could give you a good run if I had a mind to." Out of the wood-shed door he went at a brisk trot, wagging his tail, and looking back as though inviting the little girl to follow.

"I'll tell you just what we'll do, Peter," said his new friend. "We'll go and sit under the elm tree and tell secrets. Telling secrets is such fun."

Soon the two were comfortably seated under the old elm, Eleanor with her back against the trunk of the tree, and Peter with his shaggy head pillowed upon her knees.

"Peter," said the little girl, running her fingers through his soft ears, "it does so comfort me to have you to love. I don't think you are a dog really, Peter, you are just like folks. Of course I cannot love you as much as I do Uncle Nathan. But I do love you lots, as much as I did the kitten that God sent me; and, Peter, I think Uncle Nathan is almost as good as God. Of course a man couldn't be as good as God, Peter; you know that, don't you?"

Here Peter put in a short bark just to show that he really did understand the English language.

"I should think, Peter, when Aunt Lucretia whacks your back with the broom you'd bite her leg. I'm afraid I would. You see, Peter, awful mads get into me when folks are bad to me. I boil in my chest, like a teakettle. Why, this morning I called Aunt Lucretia a foreigner, and that's the worst thing there is. I s'pose I ought to feel awful ashamed, but I didn't; I was glad. I feel, Peter, Uncle Nathan wants to keep me for always and always, but Aunt Lucretia won't let him. I have got to go back to the

poor-farm this afternoon or to-morrow, and it will break my heart to lose Uncle Nathan just as I have found him."

"Of course," sniffed the dog.

"Peter," cried his companion, "if you love me, wag your tail."

Peter, who had been wagging his tail all the time, complied.

"I knew you did; I knew you did!" cried his companion excitedly. "Peter, if you don't love Aunt Lucretia, wag your tail."

Peter wagged obediently.

"I s'picioned it," said his companion, in a stage whisper. "I won't tell, Peter. Now, Peter," continued his playfellow, "you come up close, and I will whisper a secret in your ear."

Peter wriggled a few inches nearer, if that were possible, and the secret began.

"You know that old shawl up in my bedroom; Aunt Lucretia keeps it over the back of a tall, ugly old chair. Well, to-night when Aunt Lucretia has put me in bed—she don't ever kiss me good-night, Peter; think of that, and me her really niece!"

Peter cocked one ear, to express his surprise.

"Well," continued his little friend, "I'm going to get up and make a shawl dolly for myself. I have just got to have something to love nights, so I can go to sleep; and her name is going to be Arabella, and I shall call her Bella. Ain't that just fine, Peter?" inquired the conspirator in an excited whisper.

Peter saw that the climax in the confession had been reached, and that something extra was expected of him, so he threw up his head and gave two loud barks.

"You 'preciative dog! I knew you'd understand," exclaimed his companion joyously. "I think you are just splendid, for a dog." Then thinking she might have hurt his feelings, she added, "But you are folks, Peter. I just know you've got a soul."

Here the loud call for dinner in Aunt Lucretia's ringing tones put an end to the secrets, and Eleanor went to summon Uncle Nathan and follow him to the noon meal.

The atmosphere of this meal was not so tense as it had been at breakfast, but still it was not the happy family that we read about.



When dinner was over, to the consternation and grief of Eleanor and Uncle Nathan, Aunt Lucretia insisted on the colt's being caught, and the trip made to Ashton.

Nathan Benson, who thought he knew the colt better than he did women, made no objection, but started for the pasture; while Eleanor, after offering to wipe the dishes, and being told that she would break more than she would wipe, went out under the tree again to a farewell visit with Peter.

After about an hour Uncle Nathan returned from the pasture with the report that the colt was "wild as a hawk."

"I am afraid, Nate Benson, you are a-going to spoil the colt completely a-dawdling around so with him. How is the mare this afternoon?"

"She ain't so well as she was this morning. I think she may be going to have scratches," put in Nathan hurriedly. "I am wondering, Lucretia, if I hadn't better cut you a new clothes-pole, and mend the wood-shed floor, and glue up your clothes-horse, and do a few sech chores that you've wanted done for a long time. I hain't

hurried a mite this afternoon, and I can just as well do those little things as not."

"Well," replied his sister reluctantly, "I don't see but what you'll have to let the trip to Ashton go for to-day, and go the first thing in the morning. I'd like a new clothes-pole, and to have the floor fixed. I am mighty surprised that you've found time to fix 'em."

Eleanor went with her Uncle to the wonderful wood, which was all his own, and helped to select the clothes-pole. After it was cut and trimmed out, Uncle Nathan dragged it home and peeled it. Then they dug a deep hole, and stood it in the ground.

"Uncle Nathan, do you s'pose it will grow, now you have planted it?"

"No, I guess not. You see, we have spoiled its roots. It is no longer a tree, but just a stick stuck in the ground."

All too soon the afternoon passed, and almost before they knew it Aunt Lucretia was calling for supper.

After the evening meal Eleanor was allowed to sit up for an hour, and watch the shadows on the wall and the firelight dancing

in the kitchen range. The same kind of shadows she imagined that her Mother had watched when she was a girl. It was something of a comfort to know that your own dear Mother had been in that room, even though you had never known her love and protection.

Eleanor thought her Aunt was a little less stern as she led the way upstairs, but she did not dare to ask her for a good-night kiss, although her young heart ached for the parting night salutation.

Half an hour later a white-robed figure stole softly into the room and stood by the bed, looking intently down at the sleeping child.

Aunt Lucretia was a little near-sighted, but she thought there was something black on the pillow by the golden head, and, stooping, saw the old black shawl that had been her mother's made into a crude shawl doll. A chubby arm was hugging it tightly against a wet cheek.

Aunt Lucretia gazed sternly down at the sleeping figure for several minutes, and then went and turned the picture of the little

girl's mother on the wall, so that she might look at the face so long doomed to darkness.

It was a very young face for a mother, Lucretia Benson thought, and so wistful and pleading. It was as though the silent, eloquent face in the photograph was pleading for the little golden head in the bed with the tall posts—the head with the shawl doll hugged so tightly against it, and for the child face wet with tears, where smiles and sunshine should have been.

Finally, Aunt Lucretia went slowly out of the room, without turning the picture back with its face to the wall, but whether this neglect was intentional or mere forgetfulness, who shall say?

## CHAPTER V.

### A BOOK OF SECRET THOUGHTS

THE following morning when the little girl awoke, the sunlight was streaming cheerfully in at the open window. A rooster was crowing lustily, and as he flapped his wings she could imagine him upon the barn-yard fence.

Peter was barking at a passing team. Hens were clucking, chickens peeping, and birds were twittering in every tree. All Nature wore a sunny face. Surely this would be a happy day.

Then she turned and saw the face of her Mother looking down at her from the picture, that hitherto had shown her nothing but its bare back. Was she dreaming, or was it really true? She rubbed her eyes and looked again, but it was still there. What did it mean? Was it Uncle Nathan's work? Surely he would not dare touch the picture

unless he first got Aunt Lucretia's permission. Had Aunt Lucretia done it herself? The thought was too good to believe, yet it might possibly be true. Perhaps she had been "inverted," and was sorry. Perhaps she was going to be a good Aunt after all.

Hurriedly Eleanor dressed and went downstairs, hope beating high in her young heart.

The morning might have been a pleasant one, so far as Eleanor and Uncle Nathan were concerned, but for an unfortunate slip, just as breakfast was over.

Eleanor had been stirring her coffee with the spoon, and had left it in the cup after drinking, so when she started to jump up from the table, her elbow caught upon the end of the spoon and over went the cup upon the floor, breaking in many pieces.

Aunt Lucretia said not a word, contrary to her usual custom, but instead reached over and administered a sharp box on her niece's cheek.

Uncle Nathan winced at the blow as though some one had struck him, as indeed they had, but he kept silent.

The waif looked up at her Aunt with great, astonished, pain-filled eyes.

"It would not hurt me so much," she sobbed, "if you were not my Aunt. I can stand being slapped. Marm Brown usen to slap me; but when your flesh and blood slaps you, it breaks your heart."

"Flesh and blood fiddlesticks!" snorted Lucretia. "You get out of the kitchen and stay out, or everything that we've got will be broke. That was one of Great-Grandma Benson's cups. The other day it was her pitcher. If you had any pride about you, Nate Benson, you wouldn't want your own grandmother's dishes, that had been kept in the family so long, all smashed."

Out in the sunshine the birds were singing, flowers were springing, and everything was glad. With such a companion as Peter the heart-breaking grief soon wore away, and the gladness of the day entered the little girl's soul.

"Uncle Nathan," she said, as she watched him building a hen-coop out by the barn, "when Aunt Lucretia slapped me this morning, I thought my heart was broke right in

two in the middle; but I guess it was only cracked in one corner, and this perfectly be-ea-au-utiful day has mended it."

"I guess so too," replied Uncle Nathan cheerfully. "A fine day can do a lot for us if we'll only let the sunshine in. You see, we ought to bottle up a lot of it in our hearts, so when it is rainy or dark, and things seem hard, we shall have some to draw from. There ain't no better medicine for aching hearts than bottled sunshine. Put it up in large bottles, so you'll be sure and have a good supply for the dark days."

"If you put in the cork and make it all dark in the bottle, how can the sunshine live, Uncle Nathan?" asked the inquisitive one.

"I dunno, but it can. It can live anywhere. The sunshine will beat the dark every time if you only think so."

"Uncle Nathan, you are so funny. You make me laugh. I guess you're full of sunshine yourself."

"'Spect I am. I've been a-taking of it in for over sixty years. That's the way I keep a-smiling; you see, smiles are only



bottled-up sunshine. The more we smile the healthier and happier we are. If you've got a smiling face, people are always glad to see you."

"Is Aunt Lucretia's sunshine bottles all broke?" asked Eleanor in a whisper.

"Hush!" replied Uncle Nathan. "You mustn't talk about your Aunt like that. She is unfortunate. Her life has not been an easy one. If you and I love her enough, perhaps the sunshine will come back into her face."

"But, Uncle Nathan, how can I love her when she is so mean to me?"

"It's easy to love people who are good to us, but that's no credit to us. Now, if we love people who are not kind to us, we are Christians, Eleanor, and that's worth while."

"If we love folks that spitefully use us, are we knights, and princes, and princesses, Uncle Nathan, like it tells about in books?"

"Sure," replied Uncle Nathan. "The finest kind."

That afternoon Uncle Nathan went to the village a mile away by the road that wound through the woods behind the house. Elea-

nor asked to go with him, but was refused by her Aunt.

It was a long afternoon with Uncle Nathan gone. Somehow he seemed to take all the sunshine away with him, so it would seem his idea about bottling up sunshine was really true.

Peter and Eleanor had been watching for him at least an hour when the team came in sight. They both ran to meet him, the dog barking his welcome and the little girl shouting hers.

When Uncle Nathan carried in his bundles and laid them on the table, Lucretia might have noted he had a very sheepish air had she not been too busy getting supper to notice anything.

When she was setting the table, she picked up the bundles and counted them over. Tea, coffee, prunes, and salt, she enumerated. "Nathan, what is this bundle of dry goods? I didn't send for anything like that."

"Dry goods?" inquired her brother with assumed astonishment. Then his memory suddenly came to his assistance.

“Why yes, I guess I do sorter remember; yes, Lucretia. I just happened to see a fine piece of calico in the winder at Mr. Howard’s new store, an’ I got it for you. I thought it was sorter gay and cheerful.”

Miss Benson tore off the wrapper with a jerk, and the most wonderful piece of print that her eyes had ever beheld unrolled before her. Joseph’s coat would have appeared dull in the same company. Lucretia gasped.

“Well,” inquired her brother, after a full minute of silence, “how do you like it?”

“Nigger cloth!” snorted Lucretia. “Ef you think I am going to dress up in the star-spangled banner at my time of life, I guess you hev gone daft. I ain’t a circus bill or a peacock.”

“Ef it is too gay for you, perhaps you might make it into a dress for Eleanor,” put in Nathan, looking hard at his shoes, at the same time turning very red.

“Oh, Aunt Lucretia,” shrieked the high treble, “oh, do let me have it. I never had a really new dress in my life. I think it is beautiful. Please let me have it.”

Lucretia Benson turned and eyed her

brother with a gaze that would have bored holes into his very soul had he not been looking so intently at his shoes.

"That's the way you bring me presents, is it? Gettin' something you know I won't wear to the pig-pen just so that child can have it. I ain't to be put on in that way. It's nigger cloth, and will go back to the store the very next time we go to town."

The following forenoon Uncle Nathan and Eleanor were out in the harness room. Uncle Nathan was mending a harness. He had made another futile attempt to catch the colt, and the trip to Ashton had again been given up, for that day at least.

"Uncle Nathan," said the little girl after a longer pause than usual between the questions, "do you s'pose you could give me a blank book? I want to have a book to write in—a book of thoughts that will be secret, and no one know about."

"Why yes, I guess I can; but can you write, Eleanor?"

"I found an old writing-book in the garret at the poor-farm when I was six, and it wasn't written in, hardly any. I wrote it all

full, and then I took some brown paper and wrote the copy sentences all over that. Once I wrote a paper three feet square all over with 'Penmanship is an Art.' It looked awful queer when I had finished. I want to have a book to write all my thoughts, and the things that I s'posin' and what I want to do; and, Uncle Nathan, I thought if I wrote down some of my mads I wouldn't be so full of them inside. It is better to put your mads in a book than it is to keep them inside of you, isn't it?"

"Sure thing," replied Uncle Nathan. "Get 'em out at any cost."

"You know it must be a secret. I can't show it even to you."

"Seems to me that's rather mysterious," replied Uncle Nathan; "but I don't know as there's any harm in it. I'll get it if you'll try and put all your mads in it and not let any of 'em get outside. Mads are pretty bad things," concluded Uncle Nathan seriously.

That afternoon, when Uncle Nathan was cutting up potatoes for planting the next day, his niece came out on the back doorstep.

Lucretia was in the front yard working in the flower-bed that her brother had dug up the day before.

Uncle Nathan moved along on the doorstep to make room for the child when he saw her coming, and a look of boyish delight overspread his kind face. When she was seated, he pulled the sleeve of her dress, and the smiling face of the waif was lifted to his. Then he winked solemnly, and laid his hand upon his lips.

"I don't approve of secrets on general principles," he said in a whisper; "but I guess this one can't do any harm," and he laid a brand new blank book, with the picture of a deer's head upon the cover, in her hands.

There was something inside, and as Eleanor opened it a stub pencil rolled out.

"The pencil ain't much, but it was all I could find," said Uncle Nathan. "The book I was going to use for an account book; but I can get another when I go to town."

His niece sprang upon him and covered his cheek with kisses, squeezing his arm with both her chubby hands at the same time.

“Uncle Nathan,” she cried excitedly, “I know you’ve got a ’Laddin’s lamp, or how could you get things that I wanted right off, like a fairy story?”

Uncle Nathan laughed silently, chuckling away down in his throat in a way he had when greatly pleased. “It was just an accident,” he said; “I happened to have it. You run away now and look at your book.”

“I’ll go right up to my room and begin it, and I’ll keep it under the mattress. It will be a secret book of high and lofty thoughts.”

Of course it took time to write this remarkable book; but as it filled in many a lonely hour when Uncle Nathan was away, it grew with astonishing rapidity.

I shall give you a peep into this secret book when it had been under way about a week. Upon the title-page was written: “A Book of Secret Thoughts, mostly high and lofty, but some mads, and some very sorrowful. Written by Eleanor Benson Abbott, when she was eight and a half and one month by the Farmer’s Almanack—the one Uncle Nathan looks in so much, and what tells about the moon. This book is secret,

and ain't to be looked into by any one, not even Uncle Nathan, 'cepting sometimes by my child Arabella. I most always make her up when I am writing, and usually she sits in my lap. She is a great comfort to her mother."

After the title-page, which really covered two pages, closely written, there was a blank, to show that a new subject was to begin. At the top of the third page was written:—

"Pages of Mads. I can't tell a lie, so I must put down my mads. I hate to have my child look over my shoulder, and see how many there are. It's a bad example for her to see how her mother looks inside. I will have to write most of them when she is not looking. I have put this part of my secret book first, so it would be handy, because I know I'd want to turn to it very often. The Bible says (I heard Parson White read it hisself) that we are 'as proan to sin as fire is to burn upward.' He also read about a woman that had got seven mads in herself to once. That is just like me, but I don't believe she had an Aunt Lucretia."





ELEANOR'S DIARY



Nearly twenty pages were skipped after the heading concerning mads, the writer evidently thinking that there would be many entries under this head. The next division of the book was, "High and Lofty Thoughts."

"I s'pose I ought to write lots on these pages, but it don't come as easy as mads. I s'pose it is because there is so many mads in me that lofty and high thoughts can't get in. I will try and keep a place for them. I know Uncle Nathan would want me to. There ain't anything so bad but what Uncle Nathan can find a good side to it. He says there is a sunny side if it is midnight and as dark as a stack of black cats. Uncle Nathan does say such queer things. I have bit my pencil until it is all wet, and have scratched with it in my hair, but I can't get out any high and lofty thoughts. High and lofty thoughts is hard work. It makes you feel as though your insides was climbing stairs. I will not write more high and lofty thoughts, as I have not got any to write."

Here about six pages were skipped, the writer probably thinking that space would

accommodate all the lofty thoughts she would ever have. The third heading was, "Things I would like to do."

"If I was growed up, I would like to be a rich lady, with a fine bonnet with feathers on it, and a dress that went swish, swish, like the clothes in the wind, when I walked. I would like to leave a fine smell everywhere I went, like a lady that visited the poor-farm once. I usen to smell of the chair that she sit in for a week. One day the selectman came in and sat in the same chair and spoiled it."

Here about a dozen pages were skipped, and the next heading was, "Letters to my own dear Mother."

"It is very queer for me to write a letter to you, dear Mother, that I hain't ever seen, or heard the voice of, but I had to. You know there is some things that has to be done. My child is on my knee. She is made of Grandma Benson's old shawl. I don't like to speak of it, for it might hurt her feelings, when she is so lovin' and confidin'. I hope you often look down and see me. I hope you did not see Aunt Lu-

cretia slap me the other day. I allus remember you in my prayers. I shall allus love you just as much as I would if I had seen you. My child is getting uneasy, so I must stop. I love you as high up as a church steeple, and as low down as a hole dug to China. Uncle Nathan is just as good as he used to be when you was a girl. He says such funny things that he makes me laugh when I want to cry. My child wants to send her love to you. I will write again soon. I am your loving daughter, but awful lonesome sometimes, Eleanor Benson Abbott."

The next day the following chapter was added to the book of secret thoughts:—

"I am up in my room for punishment, where I have got to stay the rest of the afternoon. It isn't so much punishment as it would be if I hadn't got my child Arabella in my lap and my book of secret thoughts. I am innocent, which makes it much harder. I would like to be good enough to be a Christian, like Parson White told about, but I'm afraid I never shall. How can a girl that is only eight and a half be good when

everything is against her — when dishes jump right out of her hand and break? It is hard to be punished when you was trying to make other folks happy. Right after dinner I went up to my room to comb my hair. When I was looking at myself in the glass, I thought how 'stonished Peter would be to see hisself in the glass. 'Course, I couldn't have him come up into my room, though he is almost like folks. Aunt Lucretia thinks that dogs is dogs, but they ain't. Finally, I got a small looking-glass that is in the best bedroom. How should I know it was great-grandma's wedding present? Grandma Benson is always getting me into trouble, having such old things. I got up in a chair, and took the glass and carried it downstairs. Aunt Lucretia was in the pantry baking, and Uncle Nathan was out in the back yard. I went out under the elm tree and called Peter. When I showed him the dog in the glass, he stuck up his hair and showed his teeth and growled, and I was a'most scart. But I told Peter that the dog in the glass was a good dog, and he wagged his tail and grinned. Then the dog in the

glass grinned, and Peter went right up and gave him a dog kiss. He looked awfully s'prised when he kissed the glass, and backed off. Then he went round behind the glass to find the dog that was playing him tricks. Then he would hurry round in front and try to catch him. It was so funny, I laughed and laughed. Then I tried to show the rooster hisself in the glass, but he only ran away and said Ca-da-cut. The calf didn't even seem to see hisself. Then I thought of the little new lamb. He's the cutest ever, only he hasn't got any sense. I went into the stable, and set the looking-glass up against the wall, and then got the lamb. But he jumped quick as a flash, and butted the glass into a million pieces. I was so scart I grabbed the frame and ran for the house. It was awful lucky I met Uncle Nathan at the door. He looked very sorrowful when he saw the glass, and said I would be the ruination of Grandma Benson's wedding outfit. He took it in and 'splained to Aunt Lucretia. She said terrible things about Uncle Nathan and his niece. Uncle Nathan talked to her real calm, and said he

would buy a new glass for her, and for her not to whip me. So I was sent up to my room for the rest of the afternoon. It was so hard being misunderstood. I shan't ever speak to that lamb again in this world."



## CHAPTER VI

### MISTAKES ALL AROUND

FRIDAY and Saturday were a repetition of Thursday, with Aunt Lucretia spiteful toward her niece, and Uncle Nathan trying hard to calm the troubled waters.

Once or twice each day the trip to Ashton was mentioned, but the colt still continued "wild as a hawk." Uncle Nathan's other excuses were almost laughable, although desperately serious to him. He even astonished himself, and often experienced sharp twinges of conscience.

The heifer was liable to calve; the pigs might get out, and Lucretia could not possibly get them in. A brush fire burning on a neighbor's lot might spread to their own farm; a brood of chickens had to be taken off before the rats got them. Then there were the crops. Weeds were growing like Jack's beanstalk.

Occasionally Uncle Nathan thought he

discerned signs of a softening in his sister toward her niece. Lucretia even admitted herself, when the child was not present, that she was not using her right.

On two occasions she whipped her so severely that Uncle Nathan's wrath arose, and he forbade her to punish his niece again, saying that he would whip her when it was necessary.

On Sunday morning there was a brisk shower just before daylight, and the world looked as fresh and sweet as one could well imagine when Eleanor awoke and looked out of the window into the farmyard.

Uncle Nathan said that showers were Dame Nature's way of washing her face; and the world looked so fresh and clean that it seemed as though he must be right. Dear, kind Uncle Nathan! He was always right.

It was with a bright and smiling face that Eleanor went down to breakfast. There was something inside her young breast that continually rebounded, and hope persisted in mounting high.

"I suppose one of us will have to stay at

home from church with this child," grumbled Lucretia, as soon as her brother had finished saying grace.

"I will stay," replied Nathan quickly. Instantly he conjured up pictures of the fine time they would have together, with the house all to themselves.

"There you go again, leaving me entirely out of your calculations. How did you think I would get to church? Fly? I don't think I shall walk this muddy morning."

"That's so, Lucretia," replied her brother meekly. "You can't walk."

"No, I'll stay at home," answered Lucretia. "We haven't lost a Sunday, you and I, for five years, when the weather was decent, unless we were sick. This new arrangement of yours has broke us all up. You go 'long yourself, and I'll stay at home."

Nathan expostulated, but finally went, while Aunt Lucretia and Eleanor were left behind.

It seemed a week from the time Uncle Nathan drove away until the team again

came into the yard, but with his return sunshine came back to the old place.

"Whom did you see?" inquired Lucretia, as they sat down to the dinner-table.

"Well," replied her brother, "there was Sam Perkins and his sister, and Deacon Hopkins, of course, and Mrs. Beebe. She asked particular after you, Lucretia. There was Thomas Snow and his wife. They've got a new buggy. Abby Brown, she's allus there. Then there was some city folks from over to the Four Corners. Parson Adams was particular cordial."

"What did he say?" asked Lucretia.

"Why—well, he said it was a smart shower we had been douced with this morning."

"You call that special cordial, do you, Nate? I should think it was mighty commonplace. What else did he say?"

"Why—well, Lucretia, he—he congratulated me."

"Congratulated you!" snapped Miss Benson. "What do you mean?"

"Why," replied her brother, "he said he'd heard as how we had adopted our niece,

and he thought it was a fine Christian thing, and would do us both good. He said if we did it unto one of His little ones we did it unto the Master," almost gasped Nathan.

"A pretty mess of fish this is," exclaimed Lucretia. "We'll be the talk of the town. Whichever way we do we are sure to be blamed. All on account of that child."

The unfortunate child in question escaped to her room, sobbing heart-brokenly, "O Arabella, Arabella, your mother ain't wanted anywhere. She's just an orphan, my child. Arabella, I know you are sorry, ain't you? Say you are."

It was so still in the bedroom after this momentous question that one could have heard a pin drop. Only mother love could have heard the words Arabella uttered, but the orphan hugged the doll to her bosom, and was comforted.

For consolation she then turned to her book of secret thoughts, and wrote the following lines on orphans, which only orphans can fully appreciate:—

"Orphans are the most unfortunate children in the world. An orphan is a child

that is born without either a father or mother. Children who have both father and mother, think how it would be to be born without neither. Orphans is made to ache lots inside. They always want something they don't have. They wear clothes with holes in them. Their clothes are made out of other folk's. It makes them ashamed. They often wish they had a really new dress that was made for them. If I am ever a rich lady with lots of money, I shall be good to orphans. I shall have Christmas three or four times a year for them. (This is to make up because they don't have any parents.) I shall have two Thanksgivings and two Fourth of Julys. I shall have them live in a great house, and wear good clothes, and give them lots of candy. I am s'prised God lets so many children be born orphans. I should think He would want them to have fathers and mothers. Uncle Nathan says that God does everything perfect. Perhaps this is something He forgot. He has lots of things to remember. It must take lots of His time hearing all the prayers. I should think He would be awful busy in the even-

ing when folk go to bed. I should think Sundays He would get all wore out. I am going to say every night in my prayers, 'God bless all the orphans.'"

Monday was always a busy day in the Benson household. According to the old-fashioned custom of keeping Saturday night, Uncle Nathan put the clothes to soak on Sunday night as soon as it was sundown, and the washing began early on Monday morning.

The Monday morning start was so much earlier than that of an ordinary week-day, that when Eleanor came down to breakfast she found her Uncle and Aunt had finished eating and the dishes were being washed. Her own breakfast was kept hot in the oven, and she ate it with all haste.

When Eleanor saw the washtubs in the back room, she timidly informed her Aunt that she used to help Marm Brown with washing. "You see, I allus do my own in the dishpan. Marm Brown says I do it as well as she can."

"I don't see how you can wash anything of yours unless you take 'em off and go

naked. I guess I'll get along better without than with you. You can go with your Uncle Nathan till he starts for the ten-acre lot, and then you can play with Peter. I can't have you around with your eternal questions."

Uncle Nathan was putting the plough and harrow into the lumber wagon to draw them to the field, and could not stay to talk.

"You just go and visit with Peter," he said, "and almost before you know it I'll be coming home."

That afternoon, when they were getting up from dinner, to the consternation of Eleanor and Uncle Nathan, Aunt Lucretia ordered the old mare to be harnessed to the buggy. Both of the conspirators at once thought of the trip to Ashton, but this was not in Aunt Lucretia's mind.

When the mare was at last brought round to the door, Aunt Lucretia relieved the minds of the two by saying that she intended to drive to Riverby, the town reached by the road leading through the woods at the back of the house, and that she would be back in an hour or two.

Eleanor saw, to her deep disappointment,



when her Aunt climbed into the buggy that she had a package very much like that which contained the nigger cloth. The beautiful cloth that Uncle Nathan had wanted her to have a dress made from was going back to the store. Well, even that was better than going back to Ashton poor-farm herself and losing Uncle Nathan for all time.

"Did you see she had the cloth, Uncle Nathan?" Eleanor asked in a whisper before the buggy was fairly out of sight.

"Never mind, child," replied her Uncle. "Let's wait and see how it'll come out. You know every cloud has a silver lining. It may look dark as ink outside, but it's all silver and gold and precious stones inside."

"Oh, Uncle Nathan," replied the small girl, "you do make me laugh when I want to cry. If clouds had silver linings, the gold and the silver and precious stones would all drop down on folk's heads."

When Aunt Lucretia at last returned, she took three bundles instead of one out of the buggy. Her niece stood upon the porch watching her narrowly as she came in, but

she did not seem to notice the small, wistful figure.

That evening, when Uncle Nathan was washing up for supper, Aunt Lucretia opened the larger of the packages, and shook out, very deliberately, a piece of pretty gingham.

"I took back that hateful nigger cloth that you got, Nate. I thought as long as you had bought it yourself I might as well exchange it. I wouldn't have thought of getting anything myself."

"It will make you a pretty apron, Lucretia," said Nathan listlessly.

"Me a gingham apron!" retorted his sister. "That's as much as most men know. I suppose I shall have to make it into a dress for that child, now I've got it. I don't want to have her go back to the poor-farm in those rags. Marm Brown shall at least say that I fixed her up a little. She may be going back almost any day, so I thought I'd better get the cloth to-day."

Eleanor vibrated between joy at having a really new dress and the fear of going back to the poor-farm and losing Uncle Nathan

forever. Why did Aunt Lucretia put that sentence on? Why must all her pleasure be full of pain and disappointment? But she caught Uncle Nathan beaming at her blissfully from behind his towel when his sister's back was turned, and she was reassured.

The next bundle disclosed some new stockings and some brand new shoes, shiny and smelling just like a real store.

"I had to get these to match the dress," explained Aunt Lucretia. "I probably wouldn't have done it, only Mr. Baker put 'em in real cheap."

"Aunt Lucretia, those brand new shoes ain't for me, are they?" exclaimed her niece, jumping up and down in her excitement.

"No, they are for Peter," returned her Aunt dryly.

Again Eleanor caught a look from Uncle Nathan from behind the towel. Uncle Nathan was surely wiping tears off his weather-stained cheeks with the towel; but he was smiling, and the little girl knew that he was very happy about something.

The third bundle disclosed a small sailor hat, with a bright ribbon round it. At the

sight of this the little girl could only clasp her hands and gasp.

"I don't s'pose it's for you, Aunt Lucretia; it is so small."

"I thought it would look pretty smart on the turkey gobbler," replied her Aunt. "You see, the ribbon just matches his red."

Again Eleanor sought Uncle Nathan's face behind the towel. He was winking so hard at her, she feared his eye might pop out, and he was having hard work to keep from laughing.

Eleanor would have liked to feast her eyes on the wonderful hat for an hour, but her Aunt whisked the bundles away into the bedroom, and supper was soon ready.

It was Tuesday morning, just a week from the day when the orphan had come to the old homestead, and everything was going on merrily at the Benson farm. Uncle Nathan was putting tar upon a pail of field corn which he was getting ready for planting. He had explained to his niece that he put the tar on so that the crows, who were mischievous imps, would not scratch up the corn and eat it after he had planted it. The

little girl thought if he blacked the corn all over that it would be black when it grew, but Uncle Nathan said he guessed it would be all right.

The waif assured him that black folks always had black babies, and it ought to work the same way with corn.

Aunt Lucretia was in the pantry churning, and the house had an air of bustle and work. Eleanor, who had been playing with Peter for a time, finally tired of play, so she went in and asked her Aunt if she might sweep the kitchen. "Marm Brown usen to like to have me sweep she said. She said I could do it 'most as well as she did."

"Oh, I don't care, if you won't break anything," replied her Aunt. "I don't see as you can break the broom, so go along."

Soon the small figure was very busy with the tall broom going over the kitchen floor with the greatest of care, moving the chairs with as little noise as possible, determined that she would win the approval of her Aunt for once.

She had almost finished sweeping, and was getting the floor as clean as any grown-up

could possibly have done, when she stopped at the window to watch a humming-bird that had just come to the lilac bushes for honey. Presently the first hummer was joined by a second—the male bird, with a flaming ruby breast. The newcomer's throat was so dazzlingly bright, and he darted from lilac to lilac with such swiftness that the kitchen floor was immediately forgotten in watching this most interesting bit of feathers.

When he came so close to the window that one could almost have touched him with the hand, had it not been for the glass, the fatal thing happened. In the excitement of the moment, forgetful of the broom, the chubby hands loosed their hold upon the handle, and the hateful thing fell against the window-pane with a loud crash, breaking a large hole in the glass.

Aunt Lucretia was upon the culprit like a cat upon a mouse.

“That's what comes of letting a careless good-for-nothing child fool around in your kitchen.” She gripped the waif by the shoulder and glared down at her. “I am

half a mind to shake your head off. You haven't done anything but break things since you came here. If you stay another week there won't be a whole thing left on the place. Nate Benson, come here, will you, and see what your wonderful niece has done now."

Her brother quickly set down his pail of corn and hurried to the scene of the disaster.

"I didn't mean to," wailed the orphan. "I was just looking at a perfectly beautiful bird who was boring holes in the lilac with his bill when the broom ran right through the window itself."

"I'm sure she didn't mean to," put in Nathan. "It was an accident."

"So was Grandma Benson's pitcher and the mirror an accident. She will have to be punished, Nate; I am not going to put up with such carelessness."

Now Nathan Benson, who was the tenderest-hearted man in the world, would about as soon have cut off his right hand as punish this sobbing bit of humanity, who had been trying so hard to help; but he knew that something had to be done to again ward off

the threatened trip to Ashton. His sister saw his predicament, and pushed her advantage.

If he was determined to keep this child he would have to pay the price; she was not going to be the one always to suffer.

"Nate Benson," she flared, "it was just pure carelessness. You will have to punish her, or I shall. You can take your choice."

At this alternative poor Nathan groaned inwardly. He could not suffer her to punish the little girl again, but how could he punish her himself? Besides, he knew that she was punished sufficiently already. What should he do?

Then a bright idea came to him; it seemed almost like an inspiration. He would not need to whip her hard. He could sham punish. It would not be wicked under the circumstances. So he marched the culprit sternly into the wood-shed.

"I shall have to punish you severely, Eleanor," he said, with such mock sternness that his niece looked up into his face with astonishment. But his face belied his



words, for he was smiling down upon her most kindly, and was winking desperately with his winky eye—the one that had almost popped out the night before behind the towel.

The child at once took the cue, and no longer protested that it was an accident, and that the broom jumped itself.

Aunt Lucretia was in the kitchen listening, and there had to be at least a pretence of punishment, so Nathan took up a switch with which he sometimes admonished Peter when he chased the hens.

Again providentially, as it seemed, a roll of old carpeting lay on the wood-pile nearby. Uncle Nathan had been beating it with that very switch a few days before. So he now began belaboring the old carpet vigorously with the switch, which resounded loudly with each blow.

Now it happened that the orphan had learned a piece of poetry at the poor-farm the winter before, in which a little girl had broken into violent weeping because of the fact that dolly's head was broken.

She had recited it with great success

before the inmates of the farm at a Christmas entertainment. The crying part of the piece she had also practiced many times since, whenever Marm Brown essayed to punish her. In fact, she had found that it lessened her punishment by at least fifty per cent. So when she saw Uncle Nathan start to whipping the old carpet in her place, she set up such a sobbing and boo-hooing that Aunt Lucretia, who was listening in the kitchen with all her ears, was amazed.

She had just stepped across the kitchen threshold on her way to the wood-shed to rescue the child from so violent a chastisement, when a shadow fell across the back room floor. Apprehensively she glanced up, only to behold the tall figure of the minister, the Rev. Wilber Adams, blocking the entrance to the back side-door. He stood with one foot upon the threshold, and his hand against the casement, while upon his face surprise, anger, and embarrassment struggled for mastery.

Aunt Lucretia strove to speak, but her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. Meanwhile there was no diminution of the

blows, and the almost blood-curdling boo-hoos from the wood-shed.

“I—I,” stammered the minister.

“It—it,” faltered Lucretia.

Whack, whack, went Uncle Nathan’s switch, while the orphan responded with boo-hoo, boo-hoo.

At last Lucretia found her tongue. “Stop, Nathan,” she screamed; “you have punished the child enough.”

Surprised that Lucretia should cry enough, Nathan dropped his stick and peered through the wood-shed door into the back room.

“I thought you said punish her severely,” he said in feigned surprise.

Then he too noticed the long dark shadow on the floor, and glanced up hastily to the side-door. Never in his whole life, not even that day when as a boy he had been sentenced to stand up before the entire school at the brick schoolhouse and had been publicly disgraced, as he thought, had Uncle Nathan felt one half as small as he did when his eyes beheld the minister. He turned red and white by turns. He formed the words

“How do you do?” in his mind, but they would not come to his lips. Then he tried “It is a fine day,” but that was equally impossible. For a full fifteen seconds the three stood there speechless; then Uncle Nathan turned and bolted to the harness room in the horse barn, his refuge in time of trouble, his niece following close at his heels.

Lucretia invited the minister to come in; but he rather shortly refused, saying that he was out for one of his morning walks, and had merely looked in to see the little girl that he understood they had adopted.

With this very brief call the minister excused himself, and Lucretia Benson went back to her churning, fuming and raging at the disgrace that had fallen upon the house of Benson.

Meanwhile her brother sat upon an old broken chair in the harness room, wringing his hands and groaning inwardly. Occasionally his inward groans even came to his lips, “And me a member of the church and my father before me. What a disgrace! Why, I am liable to be took up for cruelty to children—me that loves them so.”

His niece, who had not seen the minister, stood before him wide-eyed and astonished, trying all the time to comfort him.

“Why, dear, kind Uncle Nathan,” she cried, “the bestest Uncle in the whole world, what is the matter? Tell me, Uncle Nathan—have I got you into misfortune again? I seem to get everybody into misfortune.”

“It ain’t your fault,” groaned Uncle Nathan. “You did not know, but the minister was there in the back room and heard me. Why, Eleanor, I might be took up for cruelty to children, and me a member of the church.”

“No, you won’t, Uncle Nathan. You are the very bestest Uncle in the world. I’ll tell every one so too. I will not let any one take you up. It was all my fault. I get everybody into misfortune. Oh, why was I borned. Boo-hoo, boo-hoo!” There was no sham crying now, so Uncle Nathan had to take his turn at consoling, and the two grief-stricken ones comforted each other.

## CHAPTER VII

### MORE MISTAKES AND SOME NEW FRIENDS

IT was a beautiful walk from the Benson home down through the sweet green woods by the winding road to the village, but the Rev. Wilber Adams saw not the beauties of Nature. Instead he walked with a long stride, and his usually smiling face wore a dark frown. He was clearly far from pleased with his call at the Bensons.

He had barely reached the Parsonage and related the astonishing incidents to Mrs. Adams, who shared all his perplexities, and had gone into his study to look over his notes for the next Sunday's sermon, when there came a timid knock at the Parsonage door.

Mrs. Adams at once answered it.

There upon the threshold stood a forlorn little figure. Two dark, troubled eyes were turned up to hers, and the face was so wistful and full of suffering that her heart went out to the little girl at once.

"Please, marm," piped a childish voice, "I want to see the minister. I want to talk to him about religion, and also a secret which can't be told."

"Come in," said the lady kindly, and Eleanor thought she had never heard so sweet a voice before.

"Right this way," continued the minister's wife, leading the way through the cool, pleasant hall to the study door. Here she knocked softly.

"Come in," called the voice of the minister.

She pushed open the door, and over the head of the small visitor shot a warning look, which said, plainly as words, "Now, Wilber, this is very serious. Don't laugh or be funny, or you'll be sorry."

"Hello, little girl," said the minister kindly, "whose girl are you?"

"I s'pose I really ain't any one's girl," replied a wistful voice. "That was what Marm Brown usen to say. I am just a girl from the poor-farm. I want to be Uncle Nathan's girl, and he wants me to awfully, but I am most afraid I can't. You see,

Aunt Lucretia thinks I look like my Mama, and she says my Mama was naughty to her, but she wasn't. She's got the most beautiful face, but it has always been turned toward the wall. I am hoping, and so is Uncle Nathan, but sometimes I am awful 'fraid. Uncle Nathan says every cloud has a silver lining, but I'm 'fraid mine hasn't."

"Won't you take a chair?" asked the minister. "What did you wish?"

"Why," replied Eleanor, blushing to the roots of her hair, "it was partly religion, and mostly a secret, and can't be told, 'cepting to you. I s'pose you believe in religion, don't you?"

"With all my heart," replied the minister.

Eleanor slipped down from the chair, and putting her hands upon the minister's knees, looked up into his face.

"It's a secret," she said, in a stage whisper. "You won't tell your wife, will you? Marm Brown usen to say if a man told his wife anything it was all over town by night. You won't tell her, will you?"

The minister glanced over the curly head toward the door. It was open a crack,



and he could see his better half peeping through.

He could risk nothing by this promise. "No, I won't tell," he said solemnly.

"It's awful good of you," sighed the tired little voice. "I was so 'fraid you might. You see, after you left, Uncle Nathan felt so bad he went into the harness room and wringed his hands, and cried. He said he might be took up for cruelty to children, and he a member of the church."

"It would serve him right," replied the minister quickly, "whipping a mite of a child like you."

The brown eyes flashed and the small foot stamped upon the study floor. "No, it wouldn't. He's the very best man in the whole world!"—and her face blazed up at the accuser defiantly.

"Perhaps he is," replied the minister doubtfully. "But I thought he was whipping you unmercifully this morning."

"He didn't hurt me one bit," replied the high treble excitedly. "This is the secret, and you mustn't tell, honest and true, black and blue. I broked the kitchen window

this morning. I didn't mean to. It was the hateful old broom that did it, when I was looking at a beautiful bird. Aunt Lucretia said I must be punished. It hurts to have your flesh and blood strike you. It almost breaks your heart, because they belong to you. She said if Uncle Nathan didn't punish me she would, so Uncle Nathan thought he could make-believe punish, and satisfy Aunt Lucretia. Uncle Nathan is an awful joker. He has got a winky eye. When it goes quick, you know he doesn't mean what he is saying. So he said stern, 'Eleanor, come into the wood-shed,' and winked, and I knew he wouldn't whip me hard. When he got there he didn't whip me at all, but just the carpet, and I knew I must cry because he was whipping the carpet so hard, so I cried as hard as I could. When I was crying loud as I could holler, you came and spoiled it all, and Uncle Nathan feels dretful."

Eleanor could not tell whether the minister was laughing or crying. He seemed to be laughing, and tears were running down his cheeks at the same time. "It was pretty

funny, wasn't it?" he said at length, patting the golden head, and squeezing the small hand slipped in his confidingly.

"No, it wasn't," replied the small parishioner; "it was awful sad. It 'most broke my heart."

"Well, well, never mind. It is all right now."

"I am going to invite you down to supper some night," said the minister's wife, who had just come in, "and then we will have ice-cream and cake."

"Oh, that would be perfectly 'licious, but I'll have to wait till I've had my new dress made. It's all striped, and the first really new dress I've ever had. I must hurry back, for it's 'most dinner-time."

Mrs. Adams showed her to the door, and she hurried away along the dusty country road, and was soon lost between the trees.

Tuesday and Wednesday were days never to be forgotten, for Aunt Lucretia was at last busy, basting and stitching, upon the new dress. Every motion she made was watched by Eleanor with breathless interest, and when a portion of the dress about

the shoulder did not fit she was almost in tears.

Aunt Lucretia was not quite as sour as usual while she was making the dress, for it probably eased her conscience to be doing something for her niece.

Eleanor liked to sit and watch her Aunt stitching up the long seams on the sewing-machine. She would sit as quiet as a mouse until her Aunt would suddenly look up and say sharply, "I do wish you would go away; you make me nervous watching like a cat at a rat hole."

"Aunt Lucretia, can't I have two pieces of cloth and a needle and thread? I used to sew at the poor-farm sometimes. Once I pieced up a whole block, and Marm Brown said my sewing was beautiful."

"I don't care," replied her Aunt, "if you'll go away and not bother me any more this afternoon."

After having sewed nearly half an hour, Eleanor put her work away in the kitchen and went out to play with Peter.

That evening, after Uncle Nathan had washed up, and while he was waiting for

supper, he sat down in his big armchair to rest.

“Godfrey Scissors!” he exclaimed, leaping up as though propelled by dynamite, and putting his hands suddenly behind him. “Get out, you durned bee! What air you a-trying to do anyway? Lucretia,” he called, “bring a broom; I’ve set down on a bee, and he keeps boring right into me!”

Lucretia snatched up the broom and hurried to her brother’s assistance.

“Looks sorter like a bee!” she sneered, stooping down and relieving her brother of Eleanor’s patchwork, in which the needle was still sticking. “That’s the work of your precious niece!” she said, holding it up for his inspection.

“Did Eleanor do that!” exclaimed Uncle Nathan, all interest, taking the sewing from his sister’s hand.

“Yes, she did,” replied Lucretia. “She’s the most careless child I ever saw. Always leaving things around where they don’t belong.”

“I mean the sewing, Lucretia. Just look

at those stitches, as fine and even as though a woman had done it."

"Oh yes," sniffed Lucretia, "you can't ever see anything but virtue about her."

"Well, well," continued Nathan, still gazing at the patchwork, "I do think that's pretty fine sewing for a girl who is only eight. Don't say anything about my settin' on it, Lucretia. I wouldn't have her know it for the world."

Finally the dress was finished, and the trembling, eager little figure stood before the glass admiring herself.

Aunt Lucretia had insisted that it was not necessary for her to see herself—if she knew how it looked that was enough.

"I don't want you to be getting vain and silly," said her Aunt, when she stood "Oh-ing and ah-ing!" gazing with spellbound eyes.

"I am not vain, Aunt Lucretia," she replied politely; "but when you haven't ever had a really new dress, it makes you feel all 'cited, and almost takes your breath away."

"Fiddlesticks!" retorted Aunt Lucretia.

“It ain’t nothing but print anyway, so don’t be silly.”

“I would like to kiss you for making it,” said the grateful child.

“Well, you can’t,” replied her Aunt decidedly. “I ain’t the kissing kind; besides, it ain’t no credit to me. Your Uncle Nathan got the cloth by mistake, I guess, so I had to exchange it for something.”

Wednesday afternoon Eleanor was allowed to put on the new dress, stockings, and shoes, and the adorable hat, and go to the village for her Aunt. It was a mile by the road through the woods, but she took Peter with her, and was not afraid.

It was a wonderful afternoon. The air was fresh and sweet, and all the world seemed so happy. If her Mother only knew about the new dress and hat and the squeaky shoes, she would be perfectly happy herself.

Down at the store every one was very polite to her. Mr. Baker the proprietor invited her to come into the office, saying that his only clerk was out weighing a load of hay, and that he would attend to her as soon as he had finished some writing he was

doing. He placed the small girl upon a tall stool just under the telephone, and she was all interest looking about the office.

Presently the telephone bell rang. Mr. Baker told her to sit right still, and he would talk over the top of her head. She watched his every movement—just how he took down the receiver and put it to his ear, and then talked into the queer hole in the wall. When he had finished talking he hung up the receiver, and went back to his writing; but just then a team drove up in front of the store, and a man in the carriage motioned for Mr. Baker to come outside.

When he was gone Eleanor fell to studying the telephone. It was perfectly easy to talk. Just take down that queer thing with the string on it, and hold it up to your ear, and then talk into the hole. Tim had said on that memorable journey to Uncle Nathan's that God probably had a telephone. "A sort of one," had been just his words. If her Mama only knew about the new dress she would be so happy. If she could tell God He could tell her Mama. It was such a wonderful thing to send a



message to her own dear Mother. So she stood upon the stool, and found she could reach the receiver.

It was a hot afternoon, and the hello girls in the exchange were talking and laughing. The exchange was a small one, and the operators did just about as they wished. Presently the disc for wire No. 49 bobbed up, and the girl nearest it on the switch-board plugged the wire and said, "Number?" in the usual monotonous voice.

"Please, lady," came a childish voice over the wire, "I want to speak with God."

"What!" gasped the astonished hello girl, forgetting for once to giggle. "What did you say?"

"Please, I want to speak with God," came the childish treble again.

The operator wanted to laugh, but the seriousness of the voice at the other end forbade. Instead, she said, "God isn't at home to-day, little girl."

"Oh well, Jesus will do just as well. Can I please speak with Jesus?"

"Jesus had His telephone took out last week," said the smart hello girl.

"Oh dear," came the childish voice at the other end, "I am so 's'pointed. You see, I have got a really new dress—the first one I ever had—and I wanted God to tell my Mama all about it, and now she won't know. I am so 's'pointed."

Then there was the sound of the receiver falling, and the interview was over.

When Mr. Baker returned to the office, he found the small visitor sitting upon the stool just as he had left her; but if he had been observant he might have noticed she was very red in the face, and had quite a guilty look.

"Dear me!" exclaimed the storekeeper, "I forgot to hang up the receiver."

"What a beautiful watch and chain you've got, Mr. Baker," exclaimed the tactful one, and discovery was averted.

The following afternoon, when Aunt Lucretia had gone calling and Uncle Nathan was busy building a hen-coop, Eleanor danced into the kitchen all excitement. She had determined that some day she would make a saucer pie for Uncle Nathan. Here was her opportunity. Her Aunt had been

making pies that very morning, and there was just pie-crust enough left. So, without a thought of the liberty she was taking, she skipped into the pantry where the baking was usually done.

She got out the pie-crust and some flour, and rolled it out nicely; then she found an old saucer, on which she laid the under crust, trimming it with great care. After paring and slicing a large apple and moistening the same as Marm Brown had taught her to do, she added the sugar and a pinch of salt, and then looked round for the spices.

The cinnamon she found without difficulty, and then began hunting for ginger. For a long time she could not find it, but finally a box was discovered containing a yellow powder, which surely was ginger. This she added freely. How pleased Uncle Nathan would be! She would spice the pie well for him.

When all the filling had been put in, the top crust was laid over and trimmed and crimped about the edge to keep it from breaking out, and a cut made in the middle as a vent. If she opened the oven door once

while the pie was baking, she did a dozen times. It was a wonder that it ever baked at all.

That night, as Aunt Lucretia's own pie was being passed, the saucer pie was remembered.

"Oh, Uncle Nathan and Aunt Lucretia, I've got an awful s'prise for you both!" cried Eleanor excitedly. "I 'most forgot all about it. I've made a saucer pie."

"What do you mean?" asked Aunt Lucretia sternly.

"You've made a saucer pie!" exclaimed Uncle Nathan excitedly. "Sho, you don't say so."

"Yes," replied the small culprit shyly; "I made it when Aunt Lucretia was gone. I wanted to show you both what a fine pie I could make."

"Well, if that ain't the beatenest; takin' possession of my pantry, and mussing things all up when I'm gone. Let this be the last time you do such a thing."

"She didn't mean no harm, Lucretia," said Uncle Nathan quickly. "Let's have some of that famous pie."

Delighted that she had escaped so easily, the young cook ran into the pantry and brought out the saucer pie from its place of hiding.

"It's baked all right," said Aunt Lucretia grudgingly, as she cut it into four pieces.

Uncle Nathan passed up his plate hurriedly, his face all aglow with pleasure. He cut off a big piece, and began chewing it vigorously.

"A-chew, a-chew, a-chew!" sneezed the old man, so violently that his niece nearly jumped out of her chair.

"Nate," cried his sister, "you've caught an awful cold to-day!"

"Ain't my pie good, Uncle Nathan?" asked Eleanor fearfully.

"It's — a-chew, a-chew — fine — a-chew, a-chew!" sneezed the old man, holding on to his head to keep it from flying off.

"I do believe you've caught your never-get-over," cried his sister with alarm. "You go set by the fire and finish your pie. Soon as I get through supper, I'll make some ginger tea."

Lucretia picked up a piece of the wonder-

ful saucer pie and looked at it critically. Then she smelled it suspiciously. "It looks and smells all right," she pronounced; then she put a piece into her mouth and began chewing. "A-chew, a-chew—sakes—a-chew—alive! I do—a-chew, a-chew—believe this pie—a-chew, a-chew—is bewitched! For mercy sakes, child, what did you put into it?"

"Just insides," whimpered Eleanor, trembling with fear for the fate of her pie. "I put in apple, water, salt, cinnamon, and ginger."

"Ginger?" inquired Aunt Lucretia, pricking up her ears, as you might say; "ginger—that reminds me I hain't got none to make your hot drink of, Nathan."

"Oh yes, there's a lot of it, Aunt Lucretia; I used it for the pie."

"Come right into the pantry and show me what you used," cried her Aunt. "It'll be a wonder if we ain't both poisoned. Goodness sakes alive!" fairly shrieked Miss Benson, "if she hain't gone and seasoned her pie with snuff! It was some I had to put my furs away with."

“Oh, oh! I’ve poisoned Uncle Nathan. He’ll die!” wailed the child.

“Hain’t hurt me a mite; just cleared out my head a bit. I’ve been wishin’ I could sneeze for a week. Don’t cry, Eleanor,” said the old man comfortingly; “it ain’t always just what we do that counts, but what we try to do. You tried to make a saucer pie, and that’s enough for me. You jest climb up here on my knee, and I’ll tell you a story about a squirrel who lived in a tree.”

## CHAPTER VIII

### MR. NIGGER

THE day following the incidents described in the last chapter, the faithful old dog and his little mistress were again trudging down through the woods to the village.

“Peter,” confided his little mistress, “I’ve got to see the minister again; p’r’aps he can help. Ministers is very comfortin’, because sometimes God does just what they tell Him to, and everything is all right.”

The walk to the village was made in all haste, and soon the waif was once more knocking at the Parsonage door.

“Why,” exclaimed the minister’s wife in surprise, “how nice you look, little girl, in your new gingham dress, and that pretty little hat!”

A pleased smile dispelled the cloud for the time being. “I s’pose I do look pretty nice,” said the unconscious one. “It is the first really new dress that I ever had. Aunt



Lucretia made it for me herself. Don't you think the hat is real matchy?"

"Real what?" inquired the mistress of the Parsonage.

"Why, real matchy. Aunt Lucretia said it matched my dress very well."

"Yes, it does harmonize well," replied the kind lady, trying hard not to smile.

"If you please, will you tell the minister that Eleanor Benson Abbott wants to see him?"

"I am delighted to see you," said the minister as they entered his study. He laid down his pen; the Sunday sermon was going hard, and he wanted a good excuse for stopping work upon it. "Well, what can I do for you to-day?" said the minister kindly, as soon as his wife had retired and they were alone.

"I am awful worried," began Eleanor; "and Marm Brown said that we otter to take things that worried us to the Lord in prayer; but I thought p'r'aps you could do it better than I could. You would know what to say."

"I'll do anything I can," replied the

minister; "but it is a pretty good thing for folks to do their own praying."

"It is sickness in the family," continued Eleanor excitedly. "Mr. Nigger is dretful sick."

"Who?" asked the minister, thinking he had not heard rightly.

"Mr. Nigger. He was taken this morning, and he is all limpsy-lopsy, and I am afraid he's goin' to die."

"Why, who is Mr. Nigger?" asked the minister in some perplexity. "I did not know that your Uncle had a colored man upon the place. Have they had the doctor?"

"Mr. Nigger is only a cat," she explained. "I call him Nigger because he is so black; but Marm Brown said that you must always call colored people negroes, and not niggers, so I call him Mr. Negro when he is around so as not to hurt his feelings. Uncle Nathan says that everything has got feelings."

"Is your Uncle Nathan doctoring this cat?" asked the minister, still groping for light.

"Oh no, he doesn't know anything about it, and that's why I came to you. Mr.

Nigger is in answer to prayer, and I dasn't tell anything about him, 'cause Aunt Lucretia will say, 'Stuff and fiddlesticks!' and have him kilt. She can't abide cats. She says they remind her that she is an old maid."

"This is rather serious," said the minister. "How is Mr. Nigger 'in answer to prayer'?"

"You see," replied his little companion, edging closer to him in the confidence, "the other night when Aunt Lucretia had put me to bed—she don't ever kiss me good-night—I got awful lonesome. I wanted something warm and huggy that I could kiss and to kiss me. Uncle Nathan is just as good as he can be daytimes, but I can't take Uncle Nathan to bed with me. My child Arabella is just as good and 'fectionate as she can be, but she hasn't got any arms, and can't hug. I wouldn't have her know it for the world; it would break her heart. She is made out of Grandma Benson's old shawl, and is lots of comfort to her mother. So, after she had gone to sleep, I asked God to send me something to love—something warm and soft that I could hug, and feel

love coming out of it. I'd just said 'Amen' when I heard a 'Meeaow' on top of the piazza roof, just at my window. I didn't s'pose God could answer prayer so quick. It was quick as lightning. I got right up and opened the window, and there was Mr. Nigger. An angel had brought him in answer to prayer. I took him right into bed with me, and he purred and rubbed against my face, and I could feel love coming right out of hisself and going into me. Of course I put him out on the roof quick when I got up this morning, for I was 'fraid Aunt Lucretia would see him. When I went up to make the bed he was all limpsy-lopsy, and I'm sure he's goin' to die."

"That is too bad," said the minister sympathetically.

"I think he would be all right if you would pray for him in church next Sunday. If you would say, 'Please, God, make Mr. Nigger who is sick well and strong, and restore hisself to his friends,' I know God would do it. I know He would. Uncle Nathan says your prayers are awful 'fecting."

The minister shifted uneasily in his chair, and looked both amused and perplexed.

"Can't you do it?" asked the waif, looking at him pleadingly.

"Why, well, it is rather out of the ordinary," returned the minister; "I don't think I could say just those words, but perhaps I could work it in so God would know what I meant."

"Oh, that will be perfectly beautiful," exclaimed the little girl excitedly. "Aunt Lucretia is going to finish my Sunday meeting dress, and I will be there to hear, and Mr. Nigger will be healed like the leper. I must hurry right home now," she concluded. "I was going to the store to get some trimming for my Sunday dress. I will be there, and you won't forget, will you?"

"No," promised the minister solemnly, "I won't forget."

If the making of the gingham everyday dress had been watched with breathless excitement, what shall we say of that intense period between Thursday and Saturday while the muslin Sunday-go-to-meeting dress was being made! I am afraid that words

will fail us. How can we get into mere cold words the heart-throbs and mad excitement of that momentous period?

Sometimes almost breathless the waif tip-toed around the sitting-room watching her Aunt. This was when difficult parts were being fitted, or the goods did not seem to quite fit the pattern.

When Aunt Lucretia announced that it was coming out all right, Eleanor would dash out into the wood-shed to hug Peter around the neck and tell him the glad news. I am sure no old dog ever evinced such interest in the making of a Sunday-go-to-meeting dress before or since. Peter fairly made his tail lame wagging it.

"Don't be so excited and silly," Aunt Lucretia would say; "it's only a muslin."

Sunday dawned bright and fair, just as though Nature knew about the new dress, and was determined to do her part in making the day memorable. The sweet morning air was full of bird-song, and the crowing of cocks and the cackle of hens, when Eleanor awoke and looked out of the window. There was an indescribable Sunday hush over all

things, a glad silence that toned down all these sounds and made them subservient to the solemnity of Sunday.

The colt had at last consented to be caught, probably because he, too, wanted to do something to give the new Sunday-go-to-meeting dress a send-off, and in the new harness spanked along the country road at his best pace.

Eleanor sat upon a stool between Uncle Nathan's legs, where she could occasionally give his knee an affectionate squeeze and not be seen by her Aunt, who scorned such displays of sentiment. She was allowed to hold the end of the lines.

The meeting-house was the typical country church, with its white spire pointing the way heavenward, and a weathercock showing the thrifty farmer the direction of the wind, with a prophecy of the next day's weather, as well as suggesting Peter's three-fold denial.

When Uncle Nathan told Eleanor that they had a cock for a weather-vane instead of a hen so they wouldn't have to go up and get the eggs, her eyes opened very wide, and

Aunt Lucretia looked sternly at her brother, and said such jokes did not become the Sabbath. But Uncle Nathan could not help it. He was in such good spirits. This wonderful day, and the little girl between his knees, and the Sunday sweetness all about them, meant so much to the love-hungry old man.

They marched into the solemn church quite demurely, however, notwithstanding the joke about the eggs, and took their places in the Benson pew.

First, according to the time-honored custom, the congregation arose and sang the doxology; then there was the reading of the Scripture lesson, and another hymn, and then the prayer.

To Eleanor the entire interest in the service was focused in the prayer. The minister had promised to pray for Mr. Nigger, whose malady of limpsy-lopsy had grown steadily worse since Thursday. If he only did not forget—but he said he would not. Once Eleanor got a smile and a nod from the minister's wife, and that reassured her. She had probably reminded the minister about



the sorrowful case of Mr. Nigger on the way to church. All would be well.

At last the long-delayed prayer was reached. The Reverend Wilber Adams began in the usual way, praising God for the beauty of the morning and the blessings of the day, for the privileges of worship in a Christian land, and the special blessing of living in the very best land in the world. He then prayed for the church and the town, and then he became still more personal, and prayed for those in our midst in trouble or perplexity.

“O Lord,” he continued, “we ask Thee this morning to come especially close to those who lie near unto death. If it be Thy divine will spare the afflicted one, and spread the balmy wings of healing over his head.”

Now it happened that the Reverend Wilber Adams had a peculiar habit of praying with his eyes partly open, so that he saw through the partly closed lids all that was going on in the church. More than once this had got him into trouble. As he reached this point in his prayer he happened to glance in the direction of the Benson pew.

The sunlight was streaming through a window near by, and falling directly upon the golden head of an excited little girl. He saw a face wreathed in smiles turned up to his, and the golden head was bobbing approval so hard at him that the curls were tumbling all about the happy face. Then for the first time that day the minister remembered the sorrowful plight of Mr. Nigger, for whom he had promised to slip in a word in the course of his prayer.

“It’s Deacon Snow he’s praying for,” whispered Uncle Nathan to his sister. “He was took with a shock yesterday.”

The young minister was a great joker. He was blessed with a strong sense of the ridiculous, or rather at that particular moment he thought he was cursed with it. There he was, in the midst of a fervid petition to the throne of grace for the reverent, white-haired old deacon, whose benign face he could see at that very moment just as it had looked to him the day before when he had gone into the sick room. On the other hand yonder in the Benson pew, a golden head was bobbing up and down

nearly shaking its curls off in applause, and all the time appropriating the prayer for her rusty, dishevelled, bleary-eyed old tom-cat.

It was too ridiculous. He must surely laugh. To laugh at such a solemn moment would ruin him in the eyes of the congregation. His face turned first red, and then purple. He coughed and choked, and then in sheer desperation took out his handkerchief and blew his nose. That blessed handkerchief—what a God-send it was! It enabled him to regain his self-possession and go on.

Further on in the prayer, faithful to his promise, he prayed that God would be watchful of the beasts of the field, and the fowls of the air, and our domestic animals; that we might be kind to them, and that they might be cared for in sickness, and always shown due consideration. Here he once more stole a glance at the Benson pew, but the little girl was looking out of the window. She was no longer interested in his prayer.

When they were fairly started on the way home, Nathan Benson asked the question

he had always asked on the way home from meeting for the past twenty-five years.

“How did you like the sermon, Lucretia?”

“I didn’t like it at all,” flared his sister—“that he should have taken the text, ‘Suffer little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not.’ And then that Scripture reading about it being ‘better a mill-stone be hung about one’s neck and he be cast into the sea, rather than he offend against one of them.’ I thought I caught him looking at our pew several times. If I really thought he meant to preach that sermon agin you and I, Nate, I’d never go into our church again in my whole life, for all I am a church member.”

“Why, Lucretia,” remonstrated her brother, “you know it was Children’s Sunday. The minister ’most always uses that scripter on the day ap’inted for the little ones.”

“I can’t help it, Nate,” returned Lucretia. “I felt every one was a-looking at us, and that he was preaching at us too. I never was so uncomfortable in my whole life.

You haven't forgot how the minister caught you licking this child, have you, only last Monday morning? It looks just as if he had set out to give us a going over."

Uncle Nathan's face fell. "I had forgotten all about that, Lucretia. I was so happy to-day," replied her brother.

"I don't know what he must think of you, Nate, and you as tender-hearted as a chicken. I am half a mind to tell him that it was all my fault."

"He don't think nothing bad about Uncle Nathan," put in a small voice. "I told him Uncle Nathan was just whipping the carpet."

"What?" gasped the brother and sister in the same breath. "What did you say you told him?" snapped Lucretia.

"Oh, Uncle Nathan, do see that beautiful bossy calf with the old cow away up in the pasture. Look, Uncle Nathan," cried the unfortunate orphan, knowing that she had made a terrible blunder, and wishing if possible to attract attention from the fatal words that she had unwittingly uttered.

"If she ain't a-going to answer our ques-

tion, perhaps you can throw some light on this mystery, Nate Benson," said his sister scornfully. "What does she mean by saying that you were licking the carpet?"

Poor Nathan in his perplexity hit the colt quite a sharp flick with the whip, and he broke into a gallop. It took some time for him to calm the horse down, but Lucretia was not to be put off lightly, for her suspicions were aroused.

"Ef you have got through fooling with that colt, perhaps you can answer my question," said his sister.

Nathan Benson turned and looked squarely at his sister over the curly head of his niece, and her eyes fell before his steady gaze.

"Lucretia," he said, "you didn't think I was going to lick a little lass who had not intended to do anything wrong like that, did you? Not on your life. I was whipping the old carpet that was lying rolled up on the wood-pile, and she was making-believe scream. It was the best we could do under the circumstances."

"When the minister was gone, Uncle

Nathan wringed his hands so and almost cried, and said that he might be took up for cruelty to animals, so I went right down and told the minister," confessed Eleanor. "I couldn't bear to have any one think Uncle Nathan wasn't perfect," and she buried her face between his knees and sobbed.

"Well, I guess you and Nate made a fool of me, and then you made fools of us both. We'll be the talk of the town."

"Wilber ain't the man to say a thing about it," replied Uncle Nathan. "It'll be all right." Aunt Lucretia did not reply; in fact, she said nothing more during the drive home.

The Bensons always got up early on Monday morning to begin the week well, as Uncle Nathan said. The brother and sister were sitting at the breakfast table eating, when they heard the sound of small feet coming rapidly down the chamber stairs. Then the door was thrown open, and a small dishevelled figure, still in her nightdress, burst into the room.

"Oh, oh, Mr. Nigger is dead! What shall I do? Mr. Nigger is dead! God

didn't hear the minister's prayer at all. Mr. Nigger is dead!"

"What stuff and nonsense is this, Nathan?" snapped Lucretia. "You knew about whipping the carpet; perhaps you know who Mr. Nigger is. If this house is going to be made a nigger's nest of, I want to know it, and I'll move out."

"What are you saying, Eleanor?" asked Uncle Nathan kindly. "Come and tell me all about it."

"Mr. Nigger is dead. God sent him in answer to prayer. I was so lonely for something to love that I asked God to send me something, and he sent Mr. Nigger. I took him to bed with me nights, and he was such a comfort—so warm and snugly. Three days ago he was took sick. When I went down to the store, I told the minister and asked him to pray for him, and he prayed for him Sunday; but God did not hear his prayer, and he is dead—boo-hoo, boo-hoo!"

"Where is he?" asked Uncle Nathan kindly, thinking that the child had been dreaming and thought her dream real.

"He's up on the piazza roof all limpsy-



lopsy, and is dead. I have called kitty kitty, but he won't come alive. He is dead; I know he is."

"For the land sakes, Nate," almost shrieked Aunt Lucretia, "I do believe she has had that old black cat that's been a-sculking around here in my best bed. What in the name of goodness will we have to put up with next? I've half a mind to have you hitch up the colt this very minute and take her back to the poor-farm."

Aunt Lucretia hurried upstairs, slamming the door after her, and a moment later called down to her brother,—

"Nate, you get a ladder and climb up on the piazza roof, and get that miserable, dirty, scrawny black cat, and bury it in the garden."

Nathan hastened to do his sister's bidding, and Eleanor hurried into her dress to see the tragic sight. She stood tearful and half sobbing at the foot of the ladder while her Uncle climbed on to the piazza roof and brought down the remains of Mr. Nigger.

"Uncle Nathan," she said in an awestruck whisper, when he reached the ground, "you don't s'pose we could have a funeral, do

you? If we could have a real funeral, and bury him like a Christian, I wouldn't feel so much as though my heart would break."

"Well, well, I dunno," replied Uncle Nathan. "Perhaps we might. How shall we manage it?"

"Oh, I know what would be perfectly lovely. If you would get the wheelbarrow, that could be the hearse, and you could be the horse, and I'd be the procession. P'r'aps Peter would be a mourner."

Uncle Nathan got the wheelbarrow, and carefully loaded the late Mr. Nigger on it, and Peter was brought alongside to be in readiness for the procession. But he quite disgraced himself, and nearly spoiled the funeral by barking at the remains. Many a race for his life under the barn he had given the black cat, and he now thought the corpse was playing 'possum.

"Peter, I am ashamed of you," said his little mistress, giving him a sharp box on his ear. "You ought to be ashamed to bark at a person that's dead."

At last Peter was quieted, and the procession started for the garden.

"Oh, Uncle Nathan," cried the chief mourner before they had taken a dozen steps, "the horse doesn't go behind the hearse in a real funeral. You'll have to turn around and draw the wheelbarrow. You can't think of a good epitaph, can you, Uncle Nathan, for a cat that was sent in answer to prayer?"

This was when the grave had been smoothed off and a shingle stuck up to mark the spot.

Uncle Nathan scratched his head and thought, "I can't say I can offhand," he replied.

"He grew in beauty side by side' wouldn't do, would it?" asked his niece.

"Seems to me that's more for twins," replied Uncle Nathan.

"Well," said the bereaved one with a deep sigh, "I'll think up something fine and write it in my book of lofty thoughts before I go to bed."

All day long the words of an old motto that she had seen in the poor-farm parlor kept running in her head, only she could not just remember it. How this motto

affected the epitaph written for poor Mr. Nigger in the secret book you shall see. Upon a whole page was finally drawn the outline of a shingle, and across it was written:—

“It’s better to have loved a cat that’s dead  
Than never to hev hed the cat you’ve hed.”

“I am writing in my book of secret thoughts. My soul is heavy this afternoon. Some people are born to have things tip over and break whenever they touch them. It is not safe for some folks to be around. My child Arabella understands her mother is innocent. The floor is still wet, although it was yesterday. Aunt Lucretia says I ought to live in a frog pond. She still looks sparky at me out of her eyes. All Uncle Nathan said when he saw it was ‘Godfrey Scissors!’ That is his worst sware word. He never uses it but when he is awful s’prised. This was the way it happened. It was an awful rainy day, with puddles all around in the yards. It made me think of how Tim and I usen to sail shingle-boats. Thinking about Tim made me lonesome; he was so good to

me. Aunt Lucretia was in the back room looking over rags for the tin peddler. Uncle Nathan was in the barn, and that was what made it lonesome. So I went down to the pantry and got Aunt Lucretia's big dripping-pan. I brought it up to my bedroom and put it on the floor. I went downstairs and got a tin pail, and brought it up two times full of water. When the dripping-pan was full it made a real beautiful lake right in the house. I got two spools for boats. I made them sail by blowing as hard as I could with a palm-leaf fan. My child Arabella was awfully interested. She sat in a chair near, and was smiling and laughing. She got so interested that she leaned forward in her chair and lost her balance. She fell to the floor. Her forehead struck on the edge of the pond, which was sharp and cutty. I was so scart I stepped on the corner of the pan, and over it went. It made such an awful pond right on the carpet. It made me feel chilly down my back. I just stood for a long time, and watched it grow wider and wider. I kept getting more scart; I could hear it go drip, drip down in the

parlor bedroom. I went to the top of the stairs and hollered Aunt Lucretia it had rained down.

"Aunt Lucretia came upstairs very quick. 'Where has it rained down?' she asked, surprised.

"'In my room,' I said; then I ran to Uncle Nathan.

"When we got up to my room, Aunt Lucretia was putting towels and everything she could find on the floor, and sopping things up.

"She said, very icy, 'P'r'aps you have got enough of your niece now, Nate Benson?'

"'Godfrey Scissors!' said Uncle Nathan, very solemn, like it was a funeral.

"It wouldn't have been so bad if it hadn't leaked through. I hate Great-Grandma Benson; she has got so many old things. It went right down on to the best bed with Grandma Benson's crazy quilt on it—the one that took her years to make. Her wedding spread was most spoiled, and her pillow shams. Uncle Nathan said he knew it was an accident. He said he would white-

wash the ceiling over right away. Aunt Lucretia said she and Uncle Nathan had better move out of the house and give it to me. She said perhaps Uncle Nathan would like to go to the Ashton poorhouse hisself. Uncle Nathan said, 'There, there, Lucretia,' just as he does to the cow when he is milking. I felt sorry for Uncle Nathan and myself. If things did not ever spill or break, I am sure this would be a happier world. Aunt Lucretia calls me 'butter fingers,' and will not let me wipe the dishes any more. If I was not innocent, it would not be so hard. My soul is lighter, now I have wrote it down."

## CHAPTER IX

### THE LITTLE BRICK SCHOOLHOUSE

ELEANOR had not dreamed, when Uncle Nathan had hinted one morning in the barn that she might be going to school later on, that it would so soon come to pass.

Hers was an eager little mind that hungered after knowledge, and that was why she was always asking questions. In her poor-farm days she had so envied the children who went to school, but had not thought that it would ever be her fortunate lot to look inside a schoolhouse.

But Uncle Nathan did not let the matter rest. Each evening when his niece had gone to bed he would slyly bring it up to his sister. So tactfully and insistently did he plead that on the Monday morning after the conversation in the barn, just two weeks after the first appearance of the orphan at the Benson farm, the joyful little girl and the equally delighted old man were on their



way down through the pleasant woods to the schoolhouse.

Nathan had insisted that he must go down to the school with her and introduce her to the teacher, and see that everything was all right.

"Uncle Nathan," cried the irrepressible one, skipping ahead and dancing about him in her glee, "I am so happy this morning that it almost seems as though I must 'splode with joy."

"School is a great thing," replied Uncle Nathan, smiling broadly. "I never had as much of it as I wish I had. You see my father, who was your Grandfather Benson, died when I was twelve years old, and I had to stay at home after that and help on the farm. Never went to school any after I was twelve except winters. I used to forget all I learned in the winter during the summer. But I mean that you shall have a good education. I want you to go to college and be a fine lady before I die."

"Oh, you dear Uncle Nathan! How good you are!" cried his niece, holding him so tightly about the legs that he had to stop

for the embrace. "But don't you talk about dying. I want you to live as old as Methuseler."

At this point in their conversation they rounded a bend in the road, and the schoolhouse was in sight. Eleanor edged up close to her Uncle and slipped her hand in his as they neared this temple of learning. Her heart was beating like a trip-hammer, and she was so excited that she could hardly breathe.

"Don't you be skeered," said her Uncle, seeing the movement; "every one is going to be as fine as pie to you. I am going to take you to the teacher myself."

In the schoolyard all was animation. The boys were playing leap frog, and half a dozen girls of about Eleanor's age were busy with "Ring around the Rosy." They stopped in their games, and gazed wide-eyed at the old man and the clinging, bashful little girl as they made their way through the yard and into the schoolhouse.

"This is Miss Temple, ain't it?" asked Uncle Nathan, when the teacher appeared at the door in answer to their knock. "I

am Mr. Benson from up at the Benson place. This is my niece, Eleanor Abbott. She hasn't ever been to school any, but she's going to go right along until she has learned everything you've got. Then perhaps she will go to college. I mean to do well by her," and Uncle Nathan beamed first at his niece and then at the teacher.

"I will do all I can for her," said the teacher, smiling at Eleanor, and the little girl knew that she would like her.

Uncle Nathan left at once, and Eleanor sat down upon a recitation seat, her dinner pail still held tightly in one hand and her precious sailor hat in the other.

"Won't you go out and play with the other girls?" asked the teacher, seeing how shy and embarrassed she was.

"Please, marm," replied Eleanor, "I would like to stay here with you. I don't think I like to play—that is, 'cept with Peter."

To tell the truth, she did not know what real play with other children was.

"All right," replied the teacher. "You can stay in until you get acquainted,

and then you will want to play, I am sure."

Miss Temple was very busy this morning arranging her desk, but whenever she chanced to look up she always found the new scholar's brown eyes riveted upon her. Finally she asked, "What are you looking at, little girl?"

"I think you are real beautiful," replied the new pupil. "I mean your smile is beautiful. You must have lots of bottled-up sunshine inside of you."

The teacher looked puzzled for a moment, and then her laugh bubbled forth. She had never been called good-looking before, and this compliment warmed her woman's heart. She knew that her face was badly freckled, and she had a turn-up nose and a large mouth, but she could smile—a smile right from her warm heart that instinctively loved children.

"I guess you and I will be friends all right," she said. "I like you too." Then she rang the bell for school, and the noisy, laughing company came trooping in, and school began.

Eleanor was so busy getting her reading lesson she never knew how the time passed, until the bell had sounded for recess and all went laughing and chattering out to the playground. Eleanor stopped by the teacher's desk. She wanted to be near that smile of Miss Temple's that so warmed her hungry heart.

"You had better go out and play and get acquainted," said Miss Temple; "recess is for play."

"I think you are lots better than play," replied Eleanor; and the teacher, flattered by the subtle child compliment, which she knew was sincere, let her stay.

"Please, teacher," said a piping voice at the door, "don't the new girl want to come out and play 'Ring around a Rosy'?"

Eleanor looked up, and saw a small red-headed girl, with narrow slits for eyes, and a sallow complexion. She instinctively disliked her.

"Come in, Minnie," said the teacher.—  
"Eleanor, this is Minnie Peppers. You go out with her and play 'Ring around a Rosy.'"

Eleanor would much rather have stayed with her teacher, especially as she somehow distrusted the smirking Minnie; but since Miss Temple had said go, she went.

She found a large ring of noisy girls and boys, and to her astonishment they at once made room for her at the centre. Minnie pushed her inside, and the ring closed as though by magic, and they all began circling about singing "Ring around the Rosy," etc. Eleanor was delighted. How nice they were to her! Here she was, a new scholar, at the very centre of this wonderful game.

Presently Minnie and two or three of the other girls began to snicker and nudge each other, and the song changed. At first Eleanor could not believe her ears, but louder and louder it swelled, "Ring around the poorhouse, pop goes the pauper." The rapture and delight in her wide-open brown eyes gave way to unspeakable anguish. The two big roses on her cheeks turned ashen, and with a heart-broken cry she broke through the ring and fled up the road, not even stopping to look behind as she ran.

"You're a mean, nasty thing, Minnie

Peppers," cried a large, red-faced boy. "If you wasn't a girl, I'd slap your face. I'm half a mind to do it now."

"It's nasty as pisen," put in Joe Baker.

"It ain't her fault. I hate you, Minnie Peppers," cried Jerry Baker, Joe's twin brother. "Joe and me won't ever speak to you again."

Here the loud ringing of the school bell put a stop to the outbreak, and all went shamefacedly into the schoolhouse.

"Scholars," said the teacher sternly, as soon as quiet had settled upon the school, "what was the matter this recess? What did you do to the little Benson girl to make her run home crying?"

Joe raised his hand. "Please, teacher, the girls was mean as pisen to her."

"Joseph, you should say 'poison,'" corrected the teacher.

Jerry raised his hand. "Teacher, they got her in the middle of the ring, and then sang 'Ring around the poorhouse, pop goes the pauper.' It was Minnie Peppers made 'em. She's mean as dirt."

Minnie Peppers raised her hand. "It's

true, teacher," she said stoutly. "My mother says so. She says she came from the Ashton poorhouse, and she's no better than a pauper."

"Minnie, I am surprised at you," said the teacher sternly. "The Benson girl isn't to blame for that. You ought never to speak of it. I don't know what Mr. Benson will think of me. I wouldn't have had it happen for the world. Now study your lessons at once."

It was another example of that thoughtless yet almost fiendish cruelty that children sometimes show to one of their number, revealing so plainly their animal instincts.

Meanwhile heart-broken little Eleanor ran like a wounded deer up the road, seeking to hide her grief and shame in flight. But such a shattering of her childish dreams and hopes and confidence was not easily shaken off. She ran sobbing, and finally threw herself down upon the mosses of the woods and buried her face between her chubby arms. There she wept the saltiest, bitterest tears that she had ever known. School, and the thought of other children whom she might



love, had all vanished in a flash. They all knew that she had come from the poorhouse. How the shame of it burned upon her cheeks and flushed her temples, and how it made her young heart ache!

"Oh, I won't ever go to school any more," she sobbed; "I won't go another day. I didn't s'pose folks could be so mean."

Presently the storm passed, and she sat up and dried her eyes. A new thought came to her. A boy had said that he would slap Minnie Pepper's face if she wasn't a girl. What a fine boy he must be! His face was as red as a boiled beet, but he must be good inside. Then there were Joe and Jerry Baker. They had been mad with Minnie also. Well, boys were nicer than girls anyway; perhaps she had some friends after all.

Miss Temple had smiled at her so beautifully. How could she ever give up going to school and lose that smile? She was between two fires. She couldn't go back when they all knew, and she could not lose Miss Temple's smile and the wonderful thought of learning. What a hard old world

it was! If she only had not lived at the poor-farm; that was her undoing.

What should she do? She could not go back when they had all sung "Ring around the poorhouse, pop goes the pauper;" but her dinner pail and her sailor hat were there at the schoolhouse. The thought of the dinner pail reminded her of how hungry she was. School was such hungry work. Aunt Lucretia was probably just getting dinner ready. She would go home to dinner, and then perhaps she might come back in the afternoon.

So she dried her eyes with her pocket-handkerchief and started slowly homeward. She took the additional precaution to wash her face in the brook, and carefully wiped away all trace of tears. She did not want Uncle Nathan to know how mean they had been to her. Wild horses would not draw the secret from her. She came into the yard just as Uncle Nathan drove in from the ten-acre lot.

"Hello, scholar!" he cried cheerily; "what are you home so early for? Haven't got a half-holiday so soon, have you?"

"Oh no, Uncle Nathan," replied the seeker after knowledge. "I got lonesome, and just had to come home and have dinner with you and Aunt Lucretia."

"Well, that is a great note," jeered Aunt Lucretia when the two appeared in the kitchen a few minutes later. "Couldn't stay away from the house for more than half a day. A great scholar she will make. Where's your hat and your dinner pail?"

"I forgot 'em," replied her niece, flushing a deep red.

"I suppose your head got so full of ideas that you couldn't remember to put your hat on."

Seeing that his niece was almost in tears, Uncle Nathan drew her chair up to the table and hastened the beginning of dinner.

There was a great lump in the waif's throat. She so wanted to tell some one of how mean they had been, but it would never do. Aunt Lucretia would say it served her right for wanting to go to school, and Uncle Nathan would feel so badly. She must keep it all to herself. She took a mouthful of potato and tried to swallow it. But it

would not go down by the lump in her throat, and she sputtered and choked.

"Why, child," said Uncle Nathan kindly, seeing her evident distress, "why don't you eat your dinner?"

"I can't get it down by the door-knob in my throat," sobbed his niece, "I feel so achey inside. They was so mean to me. I can't ever go to school again—boo-hoo, boo-hoo. That Minnie Peppers was so mean—boo-hoo—I can't ever learn anything as long's I live. I can't ever see Miss Temple again—boo-hoo!"

"There, there, Eleanor!" said Uncle Nathan, "I guess it'll come out all right. What did they do to you? What was Minnie Peppers mean about?"

"Oh, oh, I can't tell; it makes me so 'shamed. She asked teacher if I might play 'Ring around the Rosy'—boo-hoo—and they got me in the middle of the ring—boo-hoo—and then they sung 'Ring around the po-po-po-poorhouse, p-p-pop goes a pauper.' 'Tain't my fault I was a pauper."

As the pathetic little story was concluded, Uncle Nathan became as pale as the table-

cloth, and two bright-red spots glowed on his cheeks. He brought his fist down upon the table with a blow that made the dishes rattle, and in the most terrible voice that his niece had ever heard him use, said, "The dam ——"

"Nathan, Nathan!" cut in his sister; "go careful before the child."

"I won't go careful," thundered her brother; "the damned!" Then he chanced to look down at his niece. Her eyes were wide with astonishment. He had disgraced himself in the mind of this little girl, whose opinion he valued more than that of all the rest of the world. Poor, simple-hearted Uncle Nathan. In his double perplexity he plunged from one grievous sin into another.

"Lucretia," he said, "I should think it was a pity if I couldn't say the dam down at Sam Perkins's mill was a-getting leaky without you a-looking at me as though I was the evil one."

"Nate," said the sister sorrowfully, "I've lived with you since we was children together, and to have you first be profane,

and then add falsehood to it, is too much for one day."

"Well, I don't care if 'tis. I'll say it again. The mean, low-lived little skunks! I'd like to wring all their necks and burn 'em and the schoolhouse all up in one bonfire!"

"Uncle Nathan," asked an astonished small voice, "mads haven't got you, have they?"

"Yes, they have, child. I'm mad all through — so mad I can't eat my dinner. I'm going out to the wood-shed to split up that knotty old chunk that has been a-kicking around so many years."

"You mustn't mind your Uncle Nathan," said Aunt Lucretia. "He's all worked up. It's all my fault, anyway; but Nate is too generous to tell me so. You should never have gone to the poor-farm."

When she had finished her dinner Eleanor crept to the wood-shed, where the tremendous whacks had ceased. Uncle Nathan was sitting on the chopping-block actually wiping tears from his wrinkled face.

With a cry of sympathy and joy the little

girl sprang from her hiding-place and pounced upon him, throwing her arms around his neck and covering his face with kisses.

"Uncle Nathan," she exclaimed, "you and I don't care a bit as long as we've got each other. I think you are the very bestest Uncle in the whole world. I don't care a bit for Minnie Peppers as long as I have got you."

"That's my good, brave girl," replied her Uncle, stroking the golden head. "You and I are a mighty spanking team of hosses, ain't we?"

"The best in the world, Uncle Nathan," replied his companion, falling in with the simile. "I'm going right back to school; and if Minnie Peppers sasses me any more, I will scratch her eyes out."

"Well, well," replied Uncle Nathan, greatly comforted, "I don't know as I'd do that, but I guess she won't say anything more."

So the seeker after knowledge once more set her face toward the little brick schoolhouse. Miss Temple said nothing about

the sorry incident of the morning, intending to be very nice to the unfortunate girl after school.

Just before the afternoon recess Eleanor chanced to glance from her book out of the window, and to her great astonishment saw Aunt Lucretia, dressed in her best black dress, coming quickly down the road. Eleanor was too much surprised to notice the business-like air about her Aunt. When Aunt Lucretia knocked at the schoolhouse door, the child's heart was beating so she could hardly breathe.

"I am Miss Benson, Eleanor's Aunt," she said without ceremony. "Can my niece be excused? I have something to say to you and the school."

"You may go, Eleanor," said Miss Temple, and the little girl saw the teacher was much troubled. She hoped her Aunt would not scold her.

Out in the yard she had a strong desire to go back and listen. What would Aunt Lucretia say? Why did Miss Temple look so anxious? All this was too much for her childish curiosity, so she tiptoed back and



laid her ear close to the keyhole. At first she could make out nothing. There was the angry voice of her Aunt, and that of the teacher in lower tones.

Then Aunt Lucretia said in her most emphatic tones, "I want it distinctly understood that no boy or girl in this school is going to poke fun at my niece. She is my niece, do you understand, and I want you all to know that."

This was enough for the motherless, heart-hungry child. Feeling that she must shout for joy, and be discovered if she remained longer at the keyhole, she fled across the schoolyard and up the road toward home. Not as she had gone a few hours before, for now her feet were winged with joy.

"Oh, Miss Bush!" she cried, throwing her arms around the first bush that jutted out toward the road, "she called me her niece.—Mr. Brook, stop your babbling," she cried down at the little stream as she paused for a breathless moment at the stone bridge; "she called me her niece."

From this point on the eager feet fairly

flew until she reached the wood-shed, where Peter was encountered.

“O Peter,” she cried breathlessly, throwing her arms around the old dog’s neck, “I am owned; I am owned. I am one of the family. Aunt Lucretia called me her niece.”

Peter barked and jumped up and down just as though he understood, and who shall say but he did? He understood the joy in his young mistress’s heart, and that was enough. Upstairs she flew to her bedroom, where Grandma Benson’s shawl was whisked into Arabella in record-breaking time.

“My child, Arabella, my child!” exclaimed the frantic mother, “I have got an Aunt at last. She called me her niece. I am so happy.”

With Arabella still clasped to her breast, she went to find Uncle Nathan and tell him the good news. He had just driven into the barn with the lumber wagon; but seeing the excitement upon the child’s face, jumped hurriedly down and came to the door.

“Uncle Nathan,” cried Eleanor, dropping Arabella in her excitement, and throwing both arms around his legs, “I’m awful

wicked—I eavesdropped. I listened when I was supposin' to be coming straight home. Uncle Nathan, if a person stamps hard on the floor like this ” (and she stamped with her small foot), “and says very loud and awful severe, ‘I want you to understand that no boy or girl in this school ain’t to make fun of my niece; she is my niece ’—and there is lots of mads in her voice—don’t it mean that they own you and you are one of the family; that you belong and ain’t a poorhouse child any more? ”

“Did Lucretia say that, child?” asked Uncle Nathan, whisking his niece up into his strong arms.

“Yes, Uncle Nathan; and she sounded awful full of mads, just as you did this noon.”

“The Lord be praised, child! If your Aunt Lucretia has called you her niece in that way, she will stick to you through thick and thin. She ain’t a person to say things lightly. I guess we don’t need to fear about going back to the Ashton poorhouse any more.”

There was but one cloud on the horizon

during that first wonderful week at school, and that was due to the calf. He ought to have known better, but being a calf he didn't. Perhaps if he had known that his evil deed would be fully described in the book of secret thoughts where such tragedies were written down, he would not have broken the clothes-post.

“It is a great comfort to write in my book of secret thoughts when my soul is cast down. I am a prisoner again, just like John Bunyan, who wrote ‘Pilgrim’s Progress.’ My heart is very soar. I hate the calf. I thought I loved him lots, but he has proved false to a friend. I have wade him on the steelyards, and he ain’t heavy enough. Every morning Uncle Nathan ties him to a stake out in the back yard. He is real gentle (I mean the calf), and I asked Uncle Nathan if I might lead him out. He said if I would be careful I might. I let him suck my finger when I led him, and he went beautiful. Just when I was going to tie him a cute little squirrel ran down the old apple tree by the corner of the garden. I was so busy watching his tail twitch that

I did not notice I was tying the calf to the clothes-post, and not to his own stake. It wasn't the new strong post that Uncle Nathan and I got the other day, or it wouldn't have happened. It was a rotten post at the other end. When I left the calf, he began kicking up and running up and down. He thought he was awful smart. I did, until he broke the clothes-post, and all of Aunt Lucretia's washing just hung out went into the chip dirt. I hollered whoa; but the calf ran twice as hard as ever. He ran up and down dragging the washing through the chip dirt till it was as black as a stove. Then he broke the clothes-line, and went galloping through Uncle Nathan's hotbed. The glass flew up into a million pieces, and the calf cut his legs awfully. I am glad. I wish he had cut them off.

"When I thought of what Aunt Lucretia would do to me, I cried so Uncle Nathan came running out. It took him much as an hour to catch that calf, who thought hisself was a horse running away. Aunt Lucretia was so mad that I kept close to Uncle Nathan. Uncle Nathan said I ought to tell her

that I was sorry. I went and stood in the door thinking of something to say. She looked at me very sparky with her eyes. Then Uncle Nathan came along, and said stern, like he was mad too, ‘Eleanor, go up to your room, and stay until we call you.’ He winked at me with his winky eye, so I knew he was not really mad inside.

“By-and-by I saw Aunt Lucretia hanging out the clothes again. Then I heard the stairs creak soft, and Uncle Nathan’s hand handed in two doughnuts and a piece of pie. It is very bitter to be accused when you are innocent. I will never speak to the calf again.”

## CHAPTER X

### THE SILVER LINING

ALL through the darkest days for the waif at the Benson farm, when her Aunt had been the most vindictive, Uncle Nathan with his wonderful optimism had prophesied better times ahead. The phrase that he generally used, and the one that best pleased his niece, was the assurance that every cloud had a silver lining. This silver lining was so mysterious that she was always thinking about it, and wondering if this or that dark cloud which she could see in the heavens really had a silver lining. Uncle Nathan was such a joker.

It did appear though, notwithstanding the seeming impossibility, that Eleanor's clouds silvered up very rapidly after that first day at school. Even during that first bitter day she had made undying friends of the Baker twins and Andy. It was a great

deal to have won three such staunch boy hearts as these proved to be.

The following morning the Baker twins met her half-way up to the Benson farm, and she went back to the battle of the books and the conquest of the little country school with new heart. Susie Baker, a small, freckle-faced sister of the twins, was the first of the girls to make friends. Minnie Peppers slyly hinted that she did it because Joe and Jerry made her; at which insulting remark Jerry chased the spiteful Minnie into the schoolhouse, where she appeared a minute later at the window and ran her tongue out at the twins.

"I hope you won't mind my freckles," apologized Susie, after she had invited Eleanor to discover their various fortunes by pulling a fern to pieces to the count of "Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief."

"Oh, no," replied Eleanor quickly. "I shall love every one of them."

"Well, you wouldn't if you had 'em," sighed Susie. "They worry me dretful. I'm afraid when I grow up I can't get married. There won't any one love me, I've



got so many. I pray about it sometimes. Do you think God would take 'em away if I prayed every night?"

"Sometimes I think He hears all our prayers and sometimes I don't," replied Eleanor guardedly. And she related the case of the kitten that she and Tim had found in the haymow. Then she told the sorrowful case of Mr. Nigger, which seemed to contradict the first instance.

After school had begun, Susie asked if Eleanor might come and sit with her; and when Miss Temple granted the request, the happiness of the two little girls was complete. At recess there was still another advance of a very startling nature. Margaret Wiggins, whose father was the richest farmer in town, actually shared a stick of candy with Eleanor, while several other girls looked on dissatisfied. "That is to show I like you," explained Margaret.

"Oh, thank you!" exclaimed the orphan delightedly. "May I give Susie just a nibble?"

"Folks ain't supposed to give away things that others have given to them," replied

Margaret; "but you might let her lick one end."

When Eleanor returned to the school-room, she was about to take out her reading-book from the desk, when she discovered a large red apple lying on it. She was greatly astonished, and was just wondering how it got there when she noticed Andy watching her.

When he saw her looking his way, he slyly patted himself on the chest to indicate that he was the donor of the red apple. On receiving Eleanor's sweetest smile, he blushed to the roots of his hair, which was almost white, and fell to studying his lesson with much diligence.

"Andy is so bashful that he dasn't give her the apple himself, so he hid it in her desk," whispered Joe.

"I wish he'd stop giving her things," replied Jerry; "she belongs to us."

Once the popular wave set her way, friends came to Eleanor so fast that she did not know what to do with them, and they all resented the action of Minnie Peppers so strongly that the unfortunate Minnie re-

pented her spitefulness, for it gained her the nickname of nasty Minnie Peppers. Toward the close of the first week Minnie undertook to set herself right with the school by offering Eleanor a piece of an orange before Susie and Margaret, who were her two best friends.

"I can't take it," replied Eleanor rather mournfully, for it looked tempting. "Uncle Nathan says that we mustn't hate folks, because it ain't Christian; but I'm afraid I would think about 'Ring around the Rosy,' and it would choke me."

"Well," replied Minnie, popping the piece of juicy fruit into her own mouth quickly, for fear that Eleanor might repent, "my mother said I ought to apologize, and I guess I have done it now. Can I play house with you three this recess?"

The three went apart and consulted for a few minutes earnestly. "All she wants is to have the girls play with her," exclaimed Susie. After a few minutes Margaret reported, as their spokesman, that they couldn't grant the request because Minnie's hair was so "dretful red."

The thing, however, that gave the orphan a final standing in the little brick schoolhouse was a wonderful story that she wrote, making it all up out of her own head, as the girls explained, when the rest of them could only write compositions, and very short ones at that.

It was a very improbable little story, bearing a strong resemblance in its plot to the book hidden away from the critical eyes of Marm Brown in the haymow at the Ashton poor-farm; but as none of the rest of the school knew about this remarkable volume, it did no harm.

“ There was a very beautiful princess who lived in an enchanted palace, guarded by a dragon with green eyes, and fire coming continually from his mouth, who, sad to relate, couldn’t ever drink any water for fear he would put out the fire inside himself. The beautiful princess languished for many years, although she still remained young, just like many maidens in real life, until (the powers be praised) a brave knight heard of her sorrowful plight. He at once came galloping upon a wonderful charger, and

slew the dragon with one blow of his mighty sword. Then he carried off the beautiful princess to the minister's, where they were married, and then they went straight to the country of the brave knight. All the way they journeyed through an enchanted wood, where every thicket was an elfin bower, and where fairies, gnomes, and spirits danced upon the moss carpet of the woods and made merry, because they were so glad about the princess and her rescue. The beautiful princess and the brave knight lived happy ever afterward, and were blessed with ten children."

The little story was very neatly written upon four sheets of paper, with scarcely a blot or erasure. Miss Temple was delighted, and praised the young author lavishly, while to the children this story was like a new page out of the "Arabian Nights."

The writing of the first story was followed by others, and this soon led to the discovery that Eleanor was a wonderful little storyteller. At first she would only tell stories for her two special friends, Margaret and Susie, but one by one the rest of the girls

were admitted to the select circle; and finally, even the bars were let down to the Baker twins and Andy. Those who cared for stories would arrange themselves upon an old log in a bit of wood near the school-house, where it was cool and sweet, and with Eleanor in the middle the story would begin. Sometimes the heroine, as in the case of the story already outlined, lived happy ever afterward, but occasionally she was so unhappy as to drown herself in Sam Perkins's mill-pond. This gave local flavor to the story, and made it seem more realistic.

One Saturday afternoon just after dinner Susie suddenly appeared at the Benson farm with a polite note from Mrs. Baker, asking that Eleanor might come over to their place and spend the afternoon and stay to tea.

"Oh, Aunt Lucretia, please let me go!" almost shrieked the irrepressible one. "I haven't ever gone a-visiting in my whole life."

"This isn't going visiting," replied Aunt Lucretia; "it's just calling. Go along if you want to. You can take Peter along, so you won't be afraid to come home alone."

“Joe and Jerry will see her safely home,” put in Susie hurriedly.

Soon the two little girls were trotting along the country road to Susie’s home.

“I couldn’t say a word about it as long as your Aunt Lucretia could hear,” said Susie excitedly, “but Joe and Jerry are going to have a ‘tunermint,’ and you are to be the queen.”

“What is that?” asked Eleanor, all excitement.

“Why, they don’t just know themselves, but it’s knights and chargers and lances. They are going to use two calves for their chargers. We must pretend the calves are prancing steeds. Joe’s is a Durham, and Jerry’s is a Jersey. They’ve named one Rosinante and the other Bucephalus. We got the names out of books.”

“Oh, oh, it will be just splendidous,” cried Eleanor, clapping her hands and doing a few skips. “I know I shall be so happy to-day. What splendid boys Joe and Jerry are!”

Here the confidence of the girls was interrupted, for the two gallant knights sud-

denly appeared at a bend in the road. They had tall paper caps upon their heads, which Joe explained were helmets. Each had a long wooden sword in a leather scabbard. These swords occasionally caught between the valiant knights' legs, nearly tripping them up, but they walked with much swagger, as became such knights.

"Why don't you present us to the Queen of the Tunermint, Susie?" said Jerry, when winks and nudges had failed to make any impression upon the freckle-faced Susie.

"Oh yes," she cried, "I forgot. This," pointing her finger at Joe, "is Sir Launcelot."

Joe blushed furiously at hearing his name pronounced to the Queen, and Eleanor ducked her head in acknowledgment.

"The other knight, I have forgot his name," apologized Susie.

"Sir Bedivere," growled Jerry, to preserve his dignity.

Again Eleanor ducked, and Sir Bedivere was made supremely happy.

"They are knights out of King Arthur's 'Round Table,'" explained Susie.



At the barnyard they found the two calves already saddled and bridled. They were tied to a bar post, and each had a string bridle on his head, with a stick in his mouth for a bit. Both looked very much disgusted with the tournament.

"Bucephalus is a more spirited steed than Rosinante," said Jerry, calling attention to how the Jersey calf was tugging on his bridle. "I presume it will trouble me to hold him in."

"He ain't so steady," replied Joe. "I guess I can manage Rosinante better."

Finding that it was difficult to mount with their swords still dangling, the knights discarded them and took their lances instead.

"What are those boards you've got tied on your chests?" asked Eleanor.

"Those are our shields," replied Joe.

"Now you girls climb up on top of the barway, and the tunermint will begin," announced Jerry in a loud voice.

So Eleanor, who was the Queen, and Susie, her lady-in-waiting, took their places on the top bar, and Joe climbed with some difficulty to the back of Rosinante.

“Hand me my lance; untie him and give me the reins,” he continued.

Eleanor handed down the bean pole, which was to serve as a lance, while Susie climbed down a couple of bars and unfastened the reins, and the valiant Sir Launcelot dug his bare feet into the sides of Rosinante and cried, “Git up.”

The faithful charger turned obediently about in answer to the pull on the rein, and trotted meekly to the farther end of the barnyard, where he stood with his head in a corner trembling. “He behaves fine,” cried Joe. “I’m goin’ to manage him great. I’ll stand here at the end of the lists, and be ready to receive your charge, Sir Bedivere. Make ready, sir.”

It was with great difficulty that the gallant Sir Bedivere could mount, due to the very lively nature of Bucephalus, who reared and plunged. At last, however, he was fairly seated, and the Queen handed down his lance. Susie untied the rein, and gave it into the trembling hand of the knight.

“Look out,” cried Jerry. “I’m coming. Face and defend yourself, Sir Launcelot.”

No sooner was the frantic Bucephalus freed than he started galloping madly round the barnyard, while the gallant Sir Launcelot upon Rosinante was unable even to turn his steed about. At the first round of the barnyard the brave Sir Bedivere lost his lance, and at the second sharp turn he nearly slid over the calf's head. "Whoa! whoa!" shrieked Jerry. "He's running away! he's running away!"

But his whoas had no effect upon the frantic calf, who galloped faster and faster, seeking to dislodge his rider; but Jerry, who thought his hour had come, clung on for dear life. By the time he had made the third round of the barnyard, Bucephalus was galloping so frantically, making such sudden darts close to posts and jagged corners of the cellar wall, that the valorous knight became half paralyzed with fear. Only his tongue still remained active.

"Stop him! stop him! Whoa, Bucephalus!" he bellowed. "He'll kill me! he'll kill me! Stop him! Some one stop him!" But no one seemed able, so the terrified knight lay down upon his frantic charger

and clung to him with both hands and legs, making a most ridiculous picture. Finally a bright idea came to the stricken knight.

"Susie," he called as the frantic Bucephalus made another fast lap, "pull down the two bottom bars, and he'll run through to the pasture. I'll tumble off when he starts."

Susie scrambled down from her perch. When Bucephalus came round again the two lower bars were down. Seeing the way open for escape, he shot through under the third bar, which caught Sir Bedivere under the chin, and sent him sprawling in the mud.

Up to this point timid Rosinante had been trembling in his corner, where Sir Launcelot still sat astride him, but seeing the sudden and complete escape of Bucephalus from his tormentor, he wheeled so quickly he nearly dislodged Sir Launcelot, and galloped for the barway. Sir Launcelot also made the fatal mistake that his fellow-knight had been guilty of, and the ugly bar caught him under the chin and sent him sprawling in the mud beside Sir Bedivere.

At this dramatic moment the Queen, perched upon the top barway, lost her

balance, and fell into the heap of sprawling valor. Her curly head collided vigorously with that of Sir Launcelot, while one of her shoes struck Sir Bedivere in the mouth. Immediately there was a threefold yell of pain.

"My head is broke," moaned Eleanor.

"My brains is dashed out," cried one knight, forgetting his dignity for the moment, while the other set up a yell about his loosened tooth.

Sir Bedivere was the first to gain composure. "I'm glad your head hit mine 'stead of Jerry's," he said, trying hard not to cry. "Mine's softer than his."

"Well, she 'most kicked one of my teeth out," retorted Jerry. "I guess that hurts more than your old head."

By this time Susie came to the rescue, brushing off the dirt and comforting each in turn. At last Joe said rather sheepishly, "P'r'aps, seein' Jerry and me both got wounded, you'd better explain what the combat was about."

Susie swelled with importance, and leaned toward Eleanor in childish confidence.

"They both loves you," she half whispered triumphantly, while the knights blushed furiously on hearing their passion proclaimed in this public manner. But their blushes were not redder than Eleanor's that flamed up to the very roots of her golden hair.

"Both?" she gasped.

"Yes, both of us," replied the manly knights in a breath, "and that was why we had to fight for you. Both of us couldn't have you, so we had to decide it by force of arms."

"We both wants to marry you," said Jerry sheepishly. "Of course not now, but some time."

Again the embarrassed Queen blushed, but pleasure was plainly written on her face. Here she was, a waif from the poorhouse, who had been publicly disgraced only a few weeks before by the eposide of "Ring around a Rosy;" now she was receiving the avowals of two knights (both of them twins), all in the same breath.

"Boys, I think you are just splendicious," she cried in a happy voice. "I love both of you, so I couldn't tell which I love the

best. I think you are the very best boys in the world."

Here the ringing of the supper-bell put an end to what might have been a further complication. After a supper of hot biscuit and honey, with layer cake and custard pie, things especially relished by the youthful palate, the Queen of the Tournament walked home in the blissful twilight, while a manly knight, with drawn sword, stalked on either hand.

In the mind of the writer there is not the slightest doubt that had some evil-minded boy suddenly risen up from behind a bush and cried "Boo," both knights and Queen would have taken to their heels.

It was a wonderful evening. The hermit thrush was singing in the thicket as only he can sing. The night hawk was booming in the summer sky, and all the little birds were cheeping their good-night songs.

I doubt very much if three happier children could have been found in the township than the Queen of the Tournament and her two manly escorts as they trudged along the country road, for it is only in the

country that true childish happiness can be found.

Eleanor never knew how it was, but before she even dreamed it was coming the last day of school was at hand. Uncle Nathan and Aunt Lucretia came down to the school-house in the afternoon, for there was to be speaking of pieces, among other things, and Eleanor was to speak the famous recitation in which the doll Arabella broke her head.

When she walked out to recite, she was so frightened and her mouth so dry she did not think she could make her tongue say the words, but smiling like a full moon among the other faces she discovered the happy countenance of Uncle Nathan. He was so proud of her, she could read it in his face. He had said she should go to college and be a fine lady. She could not disappoint him, so she went through the difficult recitation without a break, and with such spirit and genuine grief at the end, that the simple country folks laughed and cried, and Uncle Nathan was happy enough to "holler right out in meetin'," as he afterward said.

After school was out there were the con-



gratulations of Miss Temple and the minister's wife and all the neighbors, and then the walk home through the wood with Uncle Nathan, holding tight hold of his hand all the way.

"I think school is perfectly splendicious," sighed Eleanor when they were coming into the yard of the Benson farmhouse. "I don't know which I like best, school or home."

"They are both pretty fine, child," returned Uncle Nathan. "I guess we couldn't get along without either."

A few days after this conversation, the following pathetic notice was recorded in the Book of Secret Thoughts: —

**"A TRIBUTE TO A PERSON THAT IS DEAD.**

"Abraham is no more. His disease occurred last night. What ailed him was the axe, but Uncle Nathan did not know. It was not his fault. He died like a soldier, with his head on the chopping-block. I hev burried what remained of his remains in the garden, but it was only his claws and his feathers and head. I hope he is scratch-

ing in the henly heaven. It was not his fault that he was born a rooster. Aunt Lucretia was very unsympathetic about his end. Abraham is mourned by his family. He leaves, besides his mother, eight brothers and two sisters. It was a very roostery brood. His father is unknown. Perhaps if he had been Sarah he could have been spared. It is awful to think you have eaten a dear friend. When I knew, it made me awful squammy. I tried to throw Abraham up, but he was down so deep I could not get at him. I was going to dry his wishbone and wish with Uncle Nathan, but I have burned it up. You cannot wish with a friend's wishbone."

## CHAPTER XI

### THE SPECTRE

AFTER supper of that last day at school, Eleanor and Uncle Nathan went out on the back doorstep to see the sun set and to have a quiet talk. They planned many wonderful times together for the summer, now that school was over and they would have more opportunities. When a few of the possibilities of the summer had been exhausted, Eleanor remembered poor Arabella, who had been left alone for the whole day. She gave Uncle Nathan a parting hug and kiss, and went up to confide her triumph to Grandma Benson's shawl, made into the comforting form of Arabella. She was in such a hurry to tell all the news to her child that she ran plump into her Aunt, who was just coming out of her room.

"Why, Aunt Lucretia, I didn't know you was up in my room," cried the little girl. She put out her hand impulsively, and

caught that of her Aunt. But Lucretia shrank back almost as though she were afraid of her, and Eleanor noticed that her hand was cold as ice. Her face, too, which was always rather pale, was ghastly white, and there were dark rings under her eyes.

“Aunt Lucretia, are you sick?” asked Eleanor, with a child’s intuition of suffering. Her Aunt answered not a word, but went silently downstairs, leaving the child staring after her wide-eyed and astonished.

She went into her own bedroom much more deliberately than she had come up the stairs. Slowly she laid Grandma Benson’s shawl down on the floor, and rolled it up for the body of Arabella. It was while making up Arabella and still on her knees that she noticed a lead pencil on the floor under the bed. Instantly Arabella was forgotten in a new alarming thought. She scrambled under the bed in a flash after the pencil, and then reached her hand up under the mattress for the Book of Secret Thoughts. It was there, but was turned round in the opposite way from that in which she always placed it. Eleanor gasped with fear, and

then drew it out quickly, and looked at it intently. Then she dropped it suddenly, and rushed across the room to the neglected shawl, and whisked Arabella into the beloved shape in a twinkling.

“Arabella, my child,” she said with deep solemnity, “this is an anxious moment for both of us. Now you must think carefully and don’t reply hasty. When you do answer, be sure and tell the truth. Listen, Arabella—has Aunt Lucretia been reading in the Book of Secret Thoughts?”

Perhaps Eleanor imagined she did not give Arabella a forward motion so that her head nodded, but others might have been suspicious.

“I knew it! I knew it!” exclaimed the orphan excitedly. “Arabella, we are ruined. My child, think of all the mean things I have said about Aunt Lucretia in that book. She was just getting to like me a little, and now she’ll hate me. Perhaps she will have me sent back to the poor-farm. Oh, Arabella, what shall I do?”

She sat in her small willow chair rocking Arabella to and fro for a long time. What

a terrible thing had happened! Everything had been coming on so nicely, and now all might be spoiled. Maybe the fine times she and Uncle Nathan had planned for the summer would never be. In the bitterness of the thought she wept salt tears on the sympathetic head of Arabella. Finally, she restored Arabella to the form of the old black shawl, and went fearfully downstairs to say good-night to her Uncle and Aunt.

Aunt Lucretia was moulding bread, and did not reply to her timid good-night, and this filled her with still greater fear. So she went silently and heavy-hearted up to bed. Aunt Lucretia did not come in as usual to see if she was safe in bed.

But three times that night after she was in dreamland her Aunt came quietly in with her candle, and stood over her sleeping niece. Keen anguish was written in the face that bent above the sleeping child, but the stern lips said not a word. Lucretia Benson's eyes were opening at last—not slowly and mercifully, as her brother had prayed and hoped, but with a sudden snap. The light numbed and bewildered her, until

she scarcely knew whether she saw or dreamed she saw. The reading of the Book of Secret Thoughts had done its work.

Certain tear-stained sentences in the pathetic little volume fairly burned themselves into Lucretia's brain. Go where she would, they always stood out on the wall before her. She could not shut her eyes tightly enough to shut them out. Every nerve in her body seemed bare and quivering to this new impression—her crime against her sister and her sister's child. If the Rev. Wilber Adams had not intended his sermon about sinning against one of God's little ones for her, God had put it into the preacher's mouth for her, and her alone. Fool that she had been not to take the lesson home, and so earlier begin the lifelong amends! Now literally it seemed to her that a millstone was hung about her neck. She would a thousand times rather be thrown into the sea than face the innocent accusing eyes of the child on the morrow—Julia's little girl, who had never known a mother!

What a world she had missed! She had come to the Benson home, seeking a mother.

God had sent her—Lucretia firmly believed this now—in answer to Uncle Nathan's prayers. God had sent her to them seeking the bread of human love, and she, Lucretia Benson, who called herself a Christian, and who was a member of the church in good standing, had given her "a stone." She was a reproach to the very name of Christian.

And Nate, what a hot iron in his patient soul this thing must have been all these years—seeing his favorite sister's child, refined and delicate, resigned to the poor-house; but, worst of all, seeing his other sister grow hard and cold! For hours she sat at her open window or paced up and down her bedroom. There was no sleep for her.

"Suffer little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of heaven."

She had not even suffered her flesh and blood to come unto her. It seemed to Lucretia that she lived a thousand years during that awful summer night.

Nathan heard her pacing up and down, and his kind heart was filled with trouble. Lucretia had not looked well of late. He



almost feared she was going to be sick. If a realizing sense of what her life had been for the past ten years had come to Lucretia, he feared for her—she was that stern and uncompromising.

“God be merciful to my sister,” he prayed, “for she is a good woman.”

After Uncle Nathan had built the kitchen fire the following morning, he called Lucretia, and then went out to the barn to do the chores. Half an hour later, when he returned for the milk pails, his sister had not come down. This was such an unheard-of thing, he hurried up to her room, fear and foreboding in his heart. He found Lucretia sitting at the open window with her head in her hands. She was fully dressed, and he noted that her bed had not been slept in during the night.

“Why, Lucretia, what’s the matter?” asked the kind-hearted brother, coming forward and laying his large, rough hand tenderly on her forehead.

Her head was very hot to the touch, and she seemed burning up with fever.

“I don’t know, Nate,” she replied list-

lessly. "I feel bad enough to die. Guess I'd better go to bed, and see if I can't sleep it off."

"You go right to bed, Lucretia. I'll bring up a cup of hot coffee."

When, a few minutes later, he brought up the steaming hot cup, his sister could not touch it. "I'm too hot already, Nate," she explained. "Ice water would taste better."

After breakfast Lucretia's condition seemed so alarming to her brother that he went for a neighbor's wife to stay with her while he brought the doctor. The physician's report was not at all reassuring. She was in for a run of fever, he said. All day long Nathan and Eleanor tiptoed around doing the housework, while the neighbor nursed Lucretia; but the next day the doctor brought a nurse, and the long, hard battle began.

The nurse's name was Miss Kendall, and Eleanor liked her from the first. She had such a bright, cheery way with her, and was always looking for the sunny side of things. When Eleanor asked her the third day, taking her cue from the serious look on

Uncle Nathan's face, if her Aunt was going to die, she laughed the idea to scorn, although she was far from reassured herself.

"Die? Of course not, chicken; we won't let her"—and she caught up the trembling child in her arms, and hugged her until she nearly squeezed her breath out.

"Oh, I'm so relieved," sighed Eleanor. "You see, I have been awful naughty to Aunt Lucretia; but I didn't know she would find it out, so I felt like I was a murderer."

How different was the air of the old farmhouse after it was converted into a hospital only Eleanor knew. It was so still and so cheerless. The old clock ticked so loudly she had almost a mind to stop it. It hurt her with its steady, solemn tick-tock, tick-tock, that would go on just the same whether her Aunt lived or died. The fire, too, had a way of snapping twice as loud as it had done before.

She and Uncle Nathan came and went like shadows, and talked in whispers. There was no laughing. All the sunlight and brightness seemed to leave the place, and dark shadows filled every crack and corner.

Eleanor had to stay at the house all day long, for Uncle Nathan was away in the fields. Crops would not wait upon sickness. Even death was nothing to them.

Then there came a time when Aunt Lucretia went down into the Valley of the Shadow. Her life hung for hours by a thread. Uncle Nathan and Eleanor hardly dared to breathe. Finally, at the little girl's urgent request, the kitchen clock was stopped, and death seemed to reign over the household. For half a day the doctor was in constant attendance, and Eleanor watched his stern, set face with awful forebodings clutching her sensitive heart. If Aunt Lucretia died she would surely be a murderer. She had not even told Uncle Nathan about the reading of the Book of Secret Thoughts. In her own mind this was the prime cause of her Aunt's illness.

But finally the tide turned, and skilful nursing and good doctoring had their reward. The fever abated, and Aunt Lucretia fell into a calm, deep sleep; and the doctor went away, but not until he had told them that Miss Benson would get well.

After he was gone Uncle and niece went out behind the barn where Miss Kendall could not see them, and laughed and wept by turns, and even did a little dancing and shouting, they felt so good.

## CHAPTER XII

### AUNT LUCRETIA IS INVERTED

It was Fourth of July morning, although there was little indication of that noisy American holiday about the Benson farm, where the usual country quiet reigned.

Uncle Nathan was shaking out a few hay-cocks in the orchard across the road from the house, while his niece sat in her Aunt's room shooin' the flies away from the patient with a maple switch that had a generous tuft of leaves at the end. Miss Kendall, the nurse, was taking some much-needed rest.

Eleanor had often helped her in this way. She loved to minister to her Aunt, partly because she left sorry for her, and also because it relieved her conscience as to her part in the sickness through the fatal reading of the Book of Secret Thoughts. How still the room was now, and how quietly her Aunt lay! She must be asleep. But Aunt Lucretia was not asleep; she was watching her niece through partly closed eyelids.

All the morning, as she sat there, Eleanor had been keeping up a great thinking. It seemed to her somehow that there was something very important in her small life that was wanting. She had always been conscious of the want, but never quite as keenly as now. What was it that was tugging at her young heart, making her sensitive child bosom ache ever so slightly?

This was not a new ache to her, for she had felt it off and on for the past five years—ever since Marm Brown ceased to baby her. Was she lonesome? No, not really, for she had the very best Uncle in the world, and who could be lonesome with such an Uncle as he was!—such a joker, so full of bottled sunshine and human kindness! She had her girl friends, Margaret and Susie, and Arabella and Peter. She was very well off after all, but still there was something lacking.

Then she fell to studying her Aunt's hand, which lay thin and transparent on the bed near her, and of a sudden it was all plain to her. She wanted not a man, or a child, or a doll, but a woman—a woman

warm and tender, loving and equal to all one's small joys and childish sorrows. Oh, how she wanted a woman to love—a mother! It was her childish heart crying out for that primitive first instinct—love of mother.

She felt so lonely, almost like crying. If she could only kiss Aunt Lucretia's hand, she might feel better. Aunt Lucretia was asleep, and would never know. So she slipped softly down from the chair and came close to the bed, and put a warm kiss upon her Aunt's toil-worn hand. To her great surprise and infinite joy the hand stole up and caressed the curls upon her golden pate.

"What is it, dear?" asked her Aunt, in a new, tender voice that astonished her niece as much as the caress had done.

"Oh, you must 'scuse me," cried Eleanor quickly. "I thought you was asleep. I felt so lonesome. I thought I would feel better if I kissed your hand."

"There's nothing to excuse, child," returned her Aunt. "I was glad to have you kiss my hand. Only I am not worthy, that is all."

Eleanor's eyes opened wide. "You mean



you don't mind having me kiss your hand? Could I kiss your cheek? I know it would make me feel better inside. I am all achey inside this morning."

"Of course you can," replied Aunt Lucretia quickly, as though she feared the little girl might repent.

But Eleanor drew back. "Why, Aunt Lucretia, I guess you must be dreaming, and ain't awake. You know you ain't the kissy kind. You have always said you wasn't."

Though the words stung her sharply, yet Miss Benson could not but see the ridiculous boomerang that had returned from her own hand.

"Never you mind, child," she said. "Perhaps I haven't been in the past, but I'm going to be in the future. I have found out a great many things of late. I'm going to be quite different if I get well—and the doctor says I will."

Eleanor continued to gaze wide-eyed and open-mouthed at her Aunt. This was too much for her small mind to grasp at once.

"You really think you are going to be the

kissy kind?" she asked slowly, as though to give her Aunt the full significance of the words.

"The very kissiest and the huggiest," replied her Aunt. "You just climb up beside me, and I will tell you what I am going to be."

Trembling with excitement, the child scrambled up and laid her curly head upon the pillow beside the silvered hair of her Aunt. Timidly she placed a warm, clinging, childish kiss upon the pale cheek, then sighed a sigh of heavenly bliss.

"Eleanor," Lucretia said, and there was a new note in her voice that thrilled the little girl as no other voice had ever done before, "I am going to begin to-day where I should have begun nearly nine years ago when your mother died; but thank God it's not too late. I have been spared for this. I am going to begin from this time on and be a mother to you—just as kind and loving a mother as I can."

The curly head bobbed up in bed like a very lively Jack-in-the-box.

"Why, Aunt Lucretia—you going to be

a mother to me? I am afraid your disease has taken to your head."

Miss Benson winced, but she also laughed, and reaching up pinched her niece's rosy cheek.

"I don't wonder you are astonished," she said. "I haven't been much of a mother to you since you have been here; but you just wait and see what I can do."

"Oh, Aunt Lucretia," cried the delighted child, "can I hug you and kiss you, and will you be real squeezey and hold me in your lap lots before bedtime? Are you sure you will kiss me every single night before I go to sleep?"

"I am sure of everything, child," replied her Aunt. "I will give you all the love that your poor starved life has missed for the past nine years. We've got a lot of time to make up, but I guess we can do it."

Miss Kendall, opening the door softly a few minutes later, found them in one another's arms, and she was too astonished to say a single word, but just went out and shut the door. "It will be the very best medi-

cine for her," she thought. "I can't do anything as good as that myself."

Half an hour later, when Uncle Nathan was shaking out the last haycock, his niece came running joyously toward him.

"Oh, you Uncle Nathan," she cried, as soon as she was within shouting distance, "I've got a great secret for you. Aunt Lucretia is inverted! Aunt Lucretia is inverted!"

"Why, what do you mean?" asked the old man in surprise as soon as he made out the words. "She ain't worse again, is she?"

"No, she's just splendicious, and too lovely for anything, and I'm sure she's almost well; but she has been inverted."

"Now come, scatterbrains, what does that mean?" asked Uncle Nathan, a puzzled look overspreading his smiling face.

"Why, inverted means turned bottom side up. That's what Parson White, who used to preach at the poor-farm, said. He said that missionaries inverted the heathen. It means that God or Jesus gets inside of you and turns you bottom up."

"I guess you mean converted," said Uncle

Nathan, catching his niece up and throwing her into the remains of the haycock. "What makes you think Lucretia is converted?"

"Why," cried Eleanor, emerging from the hay with great alacrity, "she says from this time on she's going to be my Mother. She says I may sit in her lap all I want to, and she'll kiss me good-night every single night, and everything that's splendidious and too good to get into words. I just can't make words get hold of it, Uncle Nathan. I know she's inverted."

Uncle Nathan took out his pocket-handkerchief and blew his nose very hard. He did not laugh, or even smile, but he looked very happy.

"Well, chickabiddy," he said at last, "if Lucretia said that she would be your Mother from this time on, all I've got to say is that you'll have a pretty fine one. There ain't no better woman in the world than Lucretia now she's got her eyes open."

The second surprise of this perfect day came while Eleanor and Uncle Nathan and Miss Kendall were at the supper-table, when there came a knock at the south piazza door,

the same door at which Eleanor herself had knocked so timidly three months before.

“Why, gracious Peter!” cried Uncle Nathan, “if there ain’t my hired man. I’d forgot all about him. You just go and let him in.”

The child tiptoed softly to the door, and opened it a crack. Then there was a scream of delight.

“Oh, Tim, Tim, my own big brother!” and she darted through the door and pounced upon her former playfellow at the Ashton poor-farm.

She scrambled up his long legs like a spider, and soon had her arms about his neck. Thus clinging to her old playfellow, and covering his freckled face with kisses, she rode into the kitchen.

“Oh, Uncle Nathan,” she shrieked, as soon as Tim set her down in her chair at the table, “what a s’prise party you are. I think you’re better than Santa Claus!”

Uncle Nathan beamed all over his face, and for as much as five minutes his subterranean chuckling could be heard.

“You see, I am gettin’ old,” he explained,

“so I’ve hired Tim for as long as he can put up with us. I thought it might make it pleasant for you to have another young person on the farm.”

Then for half an hour there was such a wonderful time visiting. Eleanor had to hear all about Marm Brown and Mr. Brown, and old Aunt Polly Snow; just how much the calf had grown, how many chickens there were, and how many of them were roosters. These and a hundred other things were gone over, while she poked and hugged the blushing Tim, who was happier than he had ever been before in his life.

When it was eight o’clock—and it seemed as though the big old clock had never been so spry before—she kissed Uncle Nathan and Tim good-night, and went up to kiss Aunt Lucretia, and then to bed.

“God has been awful good to us to-day, Arabella,” Eleanor murmured, as she slipped into dreamland. “We won’t be orphans any more; we are owned.”

THE END.















